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THE STORY OF HELEN DAVENANT.

THE STORY OF
HELEN DAVENANT.

BY
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"THROUGH LOVE AND WAR," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE STORY OF
HELEN DAVENANT.

CHAPTER I.

MY cousin Courtenay arrived at St. Petersburg a little more than a week before the fancy ball, in response to a telegram which had been sent to him by the Ambassador. There was a dinner-party at the British Embassy on the same night, and he was introduced to me by Lord Silchester whilst the guests were assembling.

“I must present you to Miss Collingwood, my god-daughter and ward,” he said.

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wearing an expression rather as though he were playing a practical joke upon the new military *attaché*, “a young lady who has been good enough to come out here and keep house for a forlorn old bachelor.”

I looked at Courtenay with the greatest interest, pleased to think that he could not know who I was ; and endeavoured to analyse my first impressions of him apart from any pre-conceived notions.

His face, as Miss Warden had said, was “charming,” rather than regularly handsome. Its expression was variable, and the eyes were full of fire and intelligence. He had the effect of being dark, but his hair was not quite black, and his eyes were blue. His figure was tall and soldier-like, and his voice earnest and sympathetic. He was greeted by the French Ambassador, and two or three other guests, as an old friend. They addressed him as “*mon cher*,” and ex-

pressed great pleasure at meeting him again. He appeared to respond to their welcome in a very hearty and cordial manner. It was evident that, unlike his predecessor, he got on well with foreigners. I know not how it happened that, as soon as I had looked in Courtenay Davenant's face, I felt for certain that he would one day care for me. It was not vanity that prompted this thought, for, with this consciousness of what must now, inevitably, come to pass, I possessed also the conviction that, had circumstances been other than they were, it would have been utterly impossible, probably, to bring about any such result. In a word, Courtenay would come to love me now simply because all such love must be, of necessity, hopeless, and barren of fruition. I said to myself that I would in no way strive either for, or against, what I felt to be so certainly

impending ; that I would be perfectly passive, and drift, like a straw, upon the stream of destiny. Nevertheless, I experienced a momentary sense of triumph, for the notion that my cousin had despised and rejected me once, had recurred to me whenever his name had been mentioned.

When the Ambassador presented him to me, he looked at me full in the eyes, with an expression, as I fancied, of mingled surprise and interest. I returned his gaze a little too defiantly, perhaps, considering the circumstances, but I was hugging my old grudge against him, in order that I might not be too favourably impressed.

“This is the beginning,” I was thinking, not without a feeling of pleasurable excitement.

During dinner, whenever I became conscious that Courtenay’s eyes were upon me, I turned to the French Ambassador, who

had conducted me to the table, and appeared to be deeply absorbed in his conversation. Afterwards, whenever the new military *attaché* made a movement as though to approach me, I pretended to be unaware of his intention, and feigned to be entirely engrossed with somebody else.

Alas, it was not long before I discovered that I had been playing with fire !

When we were all about to separate for the night, I fancied that, as Courtenay held out his hand to me, there was a look as of mute appeal in his eyes. I dared not meet them for more than an instant, my courage having somewhat cooled down, so that it may have been merely imagination upon my part. How, indeed, was it possible that he should come to care so soon whether I appeared to be avoiding him or not ?

Sir Courtenay Davenant, who lodged in a boarding-house upon the English quay,

was now continually at the Embassy, so that we saw each other almost every day. He interested me deeply, and I surprised myself thinking of him perpetually. I deceived myself into fancying that he occupied my thoughts because of his relationship, because he was the possessor now of my dear old home, and because of the strange circumstances which had brought us together, thus, after long years, in a foreign land. There seemed to be something quite pathetic, too, in the fact that he himself knew nothing whatever of all this; that I was at liberty, if I liked, to probe his mind upon the subject of his country-cousin, "Nelly," and lead him on to commit himself in a thousand ways.

About ten days after the arrival of the new *attaché*, Miss Warden and I were invited, with the English Ambassador, to join in a large sledging-party. According to Russian

custom, we started at midnight, and drove through the snow, in sledges, to a gipsy encampment, at some distance from the city, where, notice of our coming having been given beforehand, we were entertained by the gipsies with music and singing.

The music was altogether different from any that I had ever before heard ; wild, pathetic, and for the most part in a minor key. I knew little of the scientific part of music, but certain combinations had always affected me intensely. As I listened, now, to the plaintive notes that thrilled from the violins, and looked at the weird figures of the musicians, I could not have expressed, in words, the emotions, the memories, the wild regrets, which seemed to crowd in upon me and flood my entire being. I had separated myself a little from the rest of the company, in order that I might enjoy what I now found was not

wholly enjoyable, out of hearing of the trivial and common - place conversation which seemed to jar, just then, upon my mood. As I stood leaning against the straight stem of a pine, shrouded in my long fur cloak, I became altogether oblivious, for a while, of my actual surroundings. I cannot recall, however, the place to which I was transported in spirit, nor do I remember whether the longing which came into my heart was connected with any one individual in particular. I think not. I suppose that I was merely what is called "in the clouds," and that it must have been only the music which sent the tears into my eyes.

By-and-by I became aware that somebody was standing quite close to me. Without looking, I knew instinctively that it was Courtenay. Perhaps he had been near me for some time. He spoke, when

he saw that I had perceived him, of the gipsies and their playing. Not one of them knew a note of music, he said, in the ordinary sense of the term. They played by ear, or rather by inspiration, composing as they went on. He told me that the children, as soon as they could crawl out of the tents and get hold of a violin, would begin playing upon it as though by instinct. That they were born musicians, that their wild strains had something Oriental about them, and hence their strangeness to ears that, like mine, were only accustomed to the more conventional melodies of the West.

I listened to what he said—conscious, the while, that his words were words only, that beneath these formal phrases ran a current of deeper feeling, as impossible to translate into speech as all that was just then in my own heart.

The snow had been swept away from where we were standing; but, beyond the space thus cleared, the forest lay shrouded in fleecy whiteness, looking strangely beautiful and picturesque in the bright moonlight. Now and then, from the burdened branches of the fir-trees, little avalanches fell to earth with a mysterious whispering sound. The voices of the rest of our party, which reached us from time to time, did not prevent me from feeling that Courtenay and I were alone together, far removed, in spirit, at that moment, from all the rest of the world.

I could not tell, of course, what was passing in my companion's mind, but I had imagined at first, from the tone in which he had spoken, that his thoughts might have been somewhat akin to my own. Then, suddenly, I recollected that, to him, I must seem almost like a stranger; that the kin-

ship which, in spite of myself, had rendered him interesting to me from the first moment of our meeting, was unknown to him ; and that he could have no part, therefore, in my wonder at the strange fate which had decreed that we should stand thus together at midnight in a snow-clad Russian forest, listening to this wild music ; we, who were of the same blood, and who would have borne the same name if only I had not married !

The remembrance of my marriage—which seemed to have escaped me for the moment—came upon me now like a shock. I realized, with a sigh, that for me the romance of life was over and done with. I might look on, as it were, from afar, at the struggles and triumphs of others ; but I could have no part myself in the drama of existence. I was a wife, without the protection or companionship of a husband. I had been

a mother, but had not been permitted to derive either happiness or consolation from my child; and now my life was over, as far as hope or the fostering of tender illusions was concerned; and it seemed to have been all such a mistake!

Although no word of this had escaped me, Courtenay appeared to be conscious that I was oppressed by some sad memory. He inquired whether I was not cold, making me aware, somehow, that this question had no connection with what was passing in his mind. I suppose that, according to the barometer, the temperature must have been many degrees below freezing-point; but, wrapped up as I was, I felt impervious to cold. I told Courtenay this, saying, nevertheless, that I would go back to the camp-fires and the sledges.

I must have seemed to him at this time a strange, capricious being indeed! Seeking

him at one moment, fleeing from him the next; wayward, headstrong, and subject to all kinds of odd, imcomprehensible moods!

“Don’t go back yet, I beg of you, Miss Collingwood!” he said, almost beseechingly. “What are all those people to you? Surely this is better—better than anything.”

I knew well what he meant: that he was not alluding only to the fairy beauty of the wintry forest. To me, likewise, it seemed “better than anything” to commune with him thus. We had scarcely spoken, it is true; but there are moments when silence is more eloquent than words. I endeavoured to confirm and strengthen myself in the idea that the sympathy with which he inspired me was due merely to our relationship, and that the prejudice I had previously nourished against him may even have had something to do with this revulsion of feeling in his favour. It was simply my

sense of justice, I thought, prompting me to reinstate my cousin in my esteem. Nevertheless, "a still, small voice" (the voice of conscience, perhaps) whispered to me that this end having now been more than achieved, it would be wiser to rejoin the rest of our party.

"I must go," I said, hurriedly.

He looked down at me with eyes full of a mute appeal, but I resisted the unspoken prayer, and we went back to the gipsy camp in silence.

I shall never know quite how it happened that, when the time came for returning home, the old Russian Count, the chief organiser of the entertainment, under whose escort I had started upon the expedition, seemed to have entirely disappeared from the scene. Lord Silchester had driven off first, in company with the Count's wife. Courtenay, who seemed to be always at my

elbow, assured me that my former companion must have taken charge of some other lady. "Half the enjoyment of these '*troika*' parties," he declared, "consisted in the knowledge that 'everybody would be almost sure to get paired off wrong ;' " and then, with the subdued manner of one who submits to the inevitable, he led me to an empty sledge, and, after carefully wrapping me up in warm furs, took his place by my side, and called out to the "*isvostchik*" to drive on.

My heart was beating wildly, but I scarcely knew whether with pleasure or vexation.

"He is bringing it upon himself," I was thinking, desperately. "I have been striving against it with all my strength. His blood be upon his own head !"

CHAPTER II.

How far removed is love, love the absorbing passion, from all its baser counterfeits! Looking back upon life from the calm haven, as it were, of its afternoon, we can perceive that this kind of love was nearly always spontaneous, unpremeditated, unreasonable, leaping into being in spite of obstacles. It refused to be called forth in order to serve a set purpose, or make even the pleasant part of a bargain. Mutual respect and esteem may have fostered it, perhaps, once it had come into existence, but never did it owe its birth to these

alone, since it was in so great a measure physical, spiritual, or the result of some strange accident, or chance resemblance. Love the passion—in a word—insisted upon being love, and love alone. It scorned to be beholden to any other emotion, and waxed flickering and enfeebled from the moment when honour, gratitude, or expediency, pressed forward and mixed themselves up in the matter, as they were too often apt to do. It was upon mystery, upon illusion, upon the consciousness of its own madness, that it flourished and luxuriated, and bore delicious fruit. Of all this I knew something, even at one-and-twenty, but during this moonlight drive, with Courtenay at my side, I banished all the wisdom I might have acquired from my mind, and abandoned myself recklessly to the charms of the situation. I forgot everything during these enchanted moments,

except that I was near the man whose presence seemed to possess such power to charm and fascinate me. "We are first cousins," I said to myself, striving to salve my conscience, "the next thing to brother and sister—it is but natural that I should recognize him at once as a congenial spirit!"

We glided along through the crisp frosty air for some distance without speaking. The driver dashed on at what seemed to me a terrific pace, cracking his whip, and occasionally shouting wildly. The bells upon the harness of the three horses jingled merrily, whilst the dry snow was scattered by their hoofs upon either side of the way like white ocean-spray. Then, after a few constrained phrases upon indifferent subjects, I said something about the pleasures of sledging, the novelty, to me, of life in Russia.

"It is a pity that Petersburg is so far

from home," I said. "Once one goes away from it, one will probably never see it again."

"*I* have no home," returned Courtenay, rather sadly. "My regiment seemed once to represent the nearest approach to one of which I had ever had any experience, though there is less of this feeling in the Guards than in other branches of the service. Now, however, I have been so much away from it, that scarcely any of the youngsters know me by sight. I look upon myself as a nomad—a citizen of the world—and I am just as much, or as little, at home in one place as another."

I had used the word "home" merely in the abstract, but I saw an opportunity now of speaking to him of Northover. I would question him about it, and lead him on to talk of his relations. Later on, when he came to know who I was, he would perceive

my motive, and forgive me for my seeming boldness.

“I heard that you had a home, an old country-house in England,” I said, therefore, “a place to be quite proud of, and relations—amongst others, an uncle and a cousin.”

He looked as though a little surprised at my knowing so much about him.

“Yes,” he answered, “a nice old place in England belongs to me now, but somehow, I can’t look upon it as *home*. I have never lived there, and I had always avoided contemplating the possibility of its ever becoming mine—I knew that I was my uncle’s heir, but I said to myself that he might either re-marry or survive me. Latterly, however, he became a confirmed invalid.”

“The uncle who was the father of your cousin?”

“Yes, my father’s elder brother. After his wife’s death he took a dislike to society,

and shut himself up like a hermit. My cousin, poor girl, must have led anything but a cheerful life with him !”

“ I daresay that you used to enliven her sometimes by paying her visits from London ?” I remarked, astonished at my own boldness, “ that is, if she was young and pretty ! ”

“ Indeed, no ! I never went near the place at all ! I used to see her during her mother’s life-time, when she was quite a baby, but since then I have never set eyes on her ! ”

“ Ah, that was very unkind of you, when you knew that she was leading such a sad existence ! I should not have imagined that you would have been so hard-hearted ! ”

“ I was not kept away by indifference,” he answered. “ I was upon the point of running down to my uncle’s place more than once, and I found myself constantly thinking about my poor little cousin, wondering

what she was like, and what kind of life she led."

He had thought about me, constantly! How little I had suspected it—from this, at any rate, I might derive some gratification! And yet, in spite of this flattering admission, seeing that he made it, as he must have supposed, to an altogether different woman, I experienced the strange sensation of being, as it were, a little jealous of myself, or rather, of a *former self* that could no longer be said to possess any independent existence, the Helen Davenant of those departed years!

"You thought about her constantly," I remarked, with some bitterness, "and yet you never took the trouble to go near her!"

"I had a reason—a good one, I think," he answered, "for it concerned my cousin's happiness as well as my own. So you must not be so very hard upon me."

“I suppose you were afraid that she might fall in love with you ! ” I said, assuming a flippancy and thoroughly indifferent tone.

“Not at all ! What can I have done to make you think me so vain ? It was precisely the other way. Being at that time ‘ heart-whole and fancy free ’ it was much more likely that I should have fallen in love with *her* ! ”

“ A case of love at first sight ! You are, then, very susceptible ? ”

“ Not that I am aware of ; but in this respect a man may not be able to form a disinterested opinion of himself. As my cousin was young and pretty, and, I believe, amiable, it would not have been extraordinary if I had become attached to her. There had been some question in the family of our marrying for the benefit of the estate, which would then have been kept together, and I cared about nobody else *in those days* . ”

He accentuated these last words, and

looked at me with an expression I could not mistake.

I took no notice of it, however, but continued in the same careless tone :—

“There seems, indeed, to have been every combination essential to falling in love ! I wonder the family marriage—for the benefit of the estate—did not at once take place.”

“There was a strong reason against it, at that time,” he answered, “which, all the same—seeing how perversely things work together sometimes—might have acted as an inducement to falling in love. I had made up my mind that I would never marry my cousin on account of the relationship, which, in our particular case, I looked upon as an insurmountable obstacle ; and so I thought it best to see as little of her as possible.”

“You think, then,” I said, “that a man is more likely to fall in love with a woman when he knows it to be impossible that he

can marry her; that, with a man, an obstacle always acts as an inducement ? ”

I suppose that, unconsciously, I was speaking more earnestly than I had spoken before. He looked into my eyes inquiringly.

“ Why do you seem so anxious to know this ? ” he asked. “ Is there some obstacle to a marriage in the life of any one you are interested in—of any one you care for ? ”

“ Oh, no ! ” I answered, carelessly. “ I was speaking merely in the abstract, and thinking of no one in particular.”

“ You spoke very earnestly,” he said ; “ and the words—like all your words—seemed to me to have a particular meaning. But then, ever since I first met you, you have appeared to me to be fraught with all sorts of subtle meanings and mysteries ! Your words, your actions, seem like the words and actions of no other woman. Will you think me impertinent if I ask you a question about yourself ? ”

“No,” I answered. “You may ask me what you like.”

“Well, then—only please do not think that I inquire from mere idle curiosity—you seem to me to be possessed of such a strange mixture of innocence and experience, of insensibility and emotion. There is a freshness, an ingenuousness, about you, which is as rare as it is delightful. You are at the very opening of life, when you ought to be in the full enjoyment of your youth and beauty; and yet you assume, generally, the manner of one who can have no part in hope, or pleasure, or amusement; of one to whom life can convey no new impressions, no fresh enthusiasms! In a word, young and beautiful as you are, you often speak as though you were older and sadder than your years—as though some unhappy memory connected with the past, prevented you from enjoying any of the pleasures of the present, and I find myself wondering whether this

state of mind in a woman is likely to be the result of ignorance or of experience ; whether it is due to loneliness of heart and hunger for human sympathy, or to having once known the only kind of sympathy and companionship which it must be a misfortune to lose ? Whether—to speak plainly—you care for no one ; or whether you have cared in the past for some one who is either absent or dead ? Will you tell me if I am right in either of these two conjectures ? ”

He took my hand as he spoke—under the fur rug, and held it fast clasped in his own. I endeavoured to draw it away, for his words had gone so home to my heart that my eyes were filling with tears.

I was reminded of Hugo in his solitary retreat ; of my lost youth, gone from me for ever, as it seemed, whilst I was yet so young in years ; of my life, achieved and finished, whilst the warm blood was still coursing in my veins ; and of all that might have been

save for that which could never, now, be undone as long as I lived.

Courtenay perceived my tears. He looked dreadfully distressed.

“Forgive me! forgive me!” he murmured, still retaining possession of my hand. “To think that *I*, who would willingly die to save you a moment’s pain, should have tortured you with my impertinent questions! You know, you must know, what made me venture to speak so plainly. I love you, Miss Collingwood, you must know this; but how madly, how devotedly, you may not know yet! Tell me here, now, when for the first time I have been able to unburden my heart—Can you ever care for me? When we have seen more of each other, and when I may hope to seem less like a stranger to you? Answer me, for pity’s sake, Helen! Is there any reason why we should not love one another and be happy?”

He drew off my glove as he finished

speaking, and, holding my hand to his lips, covered it with kisses. I experienced a curious sensation as of having known beforehand that all this must happen. My heart was beating fast. It was filled with a joy and a triumph which were altogether new and enchanting. Then I remembered, and drew my hand away from him by main force.

“Hush; you must not speak to me of such things!” I said, faintly. “It is impossible! Impossible! I am not free! We must not love one another! As you said just now, I can have no part in hope!”

“Have you lost some one you cared for?” he asked, looking at me earnestly, “or are you engaged—promised to some other man?”

“No! Yes!” I answered, confusedly. “I am bound—promised—engaged. I must never care for you as long as I live!”

“How are you ‘bound’?” he asked, breathlessly. “By love or by honour?”

and he looked at me as though his hope of everlasting salvation hung upon my reply.

“By honour,” I answered, falteringly ;
“by duty ; by compassion . . . ”

“But not by affection ?” he inquired, eagerly. “You are not in love with another man ?”

“Not by the strongest affection,” I answered, feeling like one in a dream. “I am in love with no other man.”

“Thank God !” he exclaimed, fervently. “Then I should be a fool were I to let my only chance of happiness escape from my hold ! I shall pray and strive, now, only for one end—that some day you may belong to me, and be my own wife.”

And he would have taken me in his arms had I not thrust him away from me.

“I am not free !” I protested once more. “I am bound, and tied, and engaged ! Your marriage to me is as impossible as your marriage to your cousin in England.”

CHAPTER III.

ON the morning which preceded the fancy ball at the British Embassy I felt unusually nervous and excited. Until quite lately, I had taken no thought as to wherewithal I should be clothed, having resolved so firmly that I would leave St. Petersburg before the entertainment took place. At the eleventh hour, therefore, I had had to consider the important question of dress—a question which had not occupied me much of late, as I had invariably worn black.

Upon this occasion, however, I wished to look my very best. Had I reflected for a

moment I might, perhaps, have asked myself wherefore, and whether any good could possibly result from my being even proclaimed the *belle* of the ball (if such a thing could be), but, then, I did not pause to reflect.

Upon one matter I was determined. I would not represent any of the historical personages suggested by Mr. Montagu-Morrison. All the same, I must appear in some costume which would be serious, dignified, and becoming. What a pity that I had not begun to think about it a little sooner! *Now* every dressmaker in the place had been overwhelmed with orders. There seemed to be no hope that anything at all pretty or original could be completed by the appointed day.

Finally, however, after long and wearisome consultations with Miss Warden, Mason, and a sympathetic French *modiste*

who was patronised by the Imperial family, it was arranged that I should appear as "Night." Rather a hackneyed impersonation! Since the first fancy ball upon record there must have been such an enormous number of "Nights" . . . But the part was not a difficult one to represent either as regarded dress or demeanour. I possessed several black evening gowns, and it would be only necessary to dispose upon one of these some of the conventional nocturnal emblems—a star or two, and perhaps a crescent moon, and then all would be well. I should be dressed, too, very much as usual, which would prevent me from feeling shy or self-conscious; and I should be in mourning, as became an orphan, a widow (for was I not now a widow in all but the name?), a childless mother. When once I had decided upon my costume, its arrangement did not take me long. Over a well-fitting ball-dress I

was to wear a long black tulle veil, embroidered with silver stars, which was to be fastened to my hair at the back with diamond pins. I wished that I had possessed some diamond stars which I might have worn as a coronet, but I owned very little jewelry of any kind. My father, as the reader is aware, had left his personal property to my cousin, whilst Hugo's sister seemed to have appropriated most of the family jewels of the Craczkowskis. The few things my husband had given me since my marriage were connected, in my mind, with so many painful memories that I shrank from the notion of wearing any of them at a ball.

Madame Mélanie, the dressmaker who had been consulted, saw a way out of the difficulty however. She suggested a bat with wings outspread, and actually sent me the creature, stuffed past all hopes of recovery, and mounted upon a long comb,

in the same box with my starred veil, before I had had time to remonstrate. I disliked the idea of wearing this weird-looking object, neither bird nor beast—with its monkey-face and wicked little artificial eyes—upon my head. I remembered to have been told that bats were creatures of evil omen, and I fancied that this one, holding me responsible, perhaps, for its premature demise, might revenge itself after some sinister fashion, or cause a curse to descend upon me like that which followed, in “The Ancient Mariner,” upon the killing of the albatross. Nevertheless, when I stabbed the long comb into my hair, I found that this strange headgear was much less unbecoming than I had expected. The black wings disposed themselves like the wings that I had seen upon representations of Mercury, the messenger of the gods, and the effect was certainly picturesque.

Upon the very day of the ball, however, the Ambassador sent for me to his *sanctum*, where, after a few kind words, he handed me a smooth red morocco case. "Take these, my dear Helen," he said, "and wear them this evening in your hair. If they become you as well as I think they will, I must ask you to keep them as a present from your godfather. They belonged to my poor mother. I heard that you wanted diamond stars to complete your costume, and so sent to my banker for these, and they have just arrived by the messenger. I was dreadfully afraid that they might not have got here in time."

I opened the case and beheld seven beautiful diamond stars, set so that they could be worn separately or mounted in the form of a crown. It was impossible to repress an exclamation of pleasure at sight of them. I was deeply touched at my god-

father's kindness and forethought, and delighted to have done for ever with the stuffed bat.

I thanked the Ambassador warmly for all the trouble he had taken upon my account.

"I was wishing so much for some stars," I said, "but never imagined such beautiful ones as these! I shall be delighted to wear them to-night, but I could not allow you to make me such a magnificent present. You say that they were your mother's, they should remain in your family, therefore, and ought not to belong to one who is no relation."

"What relation could be more dear to me than you have become?" he asked, looking at me with regretful tenderness. "I had always meant to give you these stars when you married. But you married under exceptional circumstances, and during all the wretchedness and anxiety that ensued I

quite forgot that I still owed you a wedding present. However, if you won't keep them now, I must leave them to you in my will ! You will not be injuring anybody by accepting them, for my nephew, Tom Collingwood, is still a bachelor, and, should he marry, he will be quite well enough off to buy jewels for his wife. At any rate you must please me by wearing them to-night."

Miss Warden was loud in her admiration when I showed her the jewels.

"They will look lovely to-night, in your hair," she said ; " His Excellency naturally wished you to appear to advantage before the Emperor and the Grand Dukes."

To speak truly, the idea of shining in the eyes of the emperor and the grand dukes had never once occurred to me. My mind, I fear, was entirely pre-occupied by other thoughts. I soon perceived that Miss Warden, whilst dilating upon Lord Sil-

chester's kindness, and upon the beauty of the diamonds, had something of a less agreeable nature upon her mind. I questioned her, and, after some hesitation, she told me what troubled her.

“You will be annoyed, too,” she said, “but I ought not to keep anything from you. You will know better what manner to assume this evening to certain people, once you have heard what I have to tell, and you will perceive how very important it was that you should ~~appear~~ *appear* at this ball and be publicly presented to the Emperor. What has happened is not very important in itself, for it is impossible to prevent some people from chattering, and the words of such mischief-makers cannot have much weight in the world. You shall judge of it for yourself, however. His Excellency asked me this morning to make out a fair list of the most distin-

guished of the guests he is expecting to-night, so as to arrange the order of precedence at supper, and I went, therefore, into that little room at the end of the passage where we wrote out the invitations, because I knew that I should find there some of those nice large sheets of official paper. I wrote on for some time without hearing a sound, then by-and-by I became aware of voices, English voices, proceeding from the next room, which, as you know, is only shut off by folding-doors. Naturally, I had no intention of listening, nor had I any idea that the speakers would allude to subjects of a private nature—I continued writing, therefore, without heeding them. By-and-by, however, one of them mentioned your name, “*la belle Hélène*,” those were the precise words. After that, I confess, I could not resist trying to make out what they were saying about you.”

“And what did you hear?” I asked, interested in spite of myself.

“For some time I heard nothing but confused sounds. Then one of the speakers said, with a sneering laugh, ‘She made up so violently to poor Dangerfield, your predecessor, that being, as you know, a virtuous man, who has suffered much from the persecutions of the fair sex, he took fright, and actually made a bolt of it to England, without telling her the day, as she had proposed, it seems, that he should escort her home.’ I felt terribly indignant, as you may suppose, at hearing this gross misrepresentation of facts.”

“Who could have invented anything so malicious?” I exclaimed, angry and wounded.
“What can I do to contradict it?”

“Wait until you have heard more, and then we must think of some way of refuting these calumnies. The voices became too

confused immediately afterwards for me to distinguish anything. Both persons seemed to be speaking at once. Then the first speaker, proceeding with his good-natured remarks, went on to say, ‘Didn’t it strike you at once that the old “duenna,” or “sheep-dog,” was one of those estimable females who offer their services through the medium of an advertisement, and whose respectable appearance give an aspect of decorum to the most equivocal arrangements?’ How true it is, Helen, that listeners never hear any good of themselves !”

“I can guess the name of one of the speakers, at least !” I exclaimed, indignantly ; “surely you were able to recognise their voices ?”

“I could not fail to do so, of course ; but we will talk of that presently. By-and-by, I heard the door open, and then the person who had spoken of me as an ‘old sheep-dog,’

called out to the other, who was evidently leaving the room, ‘ Well, being now “ first favourite,” you’re bound, of course, to stick up for her. Only, mark my words, they won’t venture to present her to the Emperor to-night : she was awfully anxious to shirk the ball altogether.’ And then the door banged violently, and I heard no more.”

Since then, however, Miss Warden has told me that she did hear just one sentence more, only, fearing to awaken painful recollections, she refrained from repeating it to me at the time. As several things which happened afterwards were probably due to the suspicions which it aroused, I may as well mention at once what it was. After an allusion had been made to “ St. Dalmas de Tende,” the person who had spoken first remarked, scoffingly, to his companion, “ Well, you may believe me or not—just as you like—but all I can swear is, there was

a baby !” Of this last shaft, however, as I have already said, I fortunately knew nothing at the time.

“The first speaker,” Miss Warden remarked, in conclusion, “was, of course, that horrid little Mr. Morrison. We have somehow offended his vanity, and this is his revenge. The other was your cousin, Sir Courtenay Davenant.”

I had been certain of this from the first. The spiteful insinuations respecting Captain Dangerfield, Courtenay’s predecessor in the post of military *attaché*, together with the taunt about being now “first favourite” (the only foundation for which must have originated in the fact that my cousin had returned with me from the *troika* party), convinced me that I could not be mistaken in my conjecture.

“How shall I be able to meet Courtenay to-night !” I exclaimed, my cheeks burning

with indignation, “knowing that he probably believes all these dreadful insinuations against me? And how can I look that wicked, mischief-making little wretch in the face, who has been trying to prejudice him against us?”

“You will meet them both with the utmost composure, I hope,” replied Miss Warden, cheerfully, “and put all your enemies to confusion. You will be standing with that lovely *bouquet* which has been ordered for you, receiving the Emperor and the Grand Dukes at the entrance to the ball-room. This will at once give the lie to Mr. Morrison’s aspersions.”

I felt so agitated and restless after these revelations, and I tormented myself so persistently by trying to imagine what effect they had produced upon Courtenay, that I found it impossible to settle down to any kind of occupation. When the servant came to

us for orders for the afternoon, I asked Miss Warden if she would accompany me for a drive. I was in need of some powerful counter-excitement, and I had suddenly decided upon a plan of action. I would depart from St. Petersburg as soon after the ball as I could conveniently pack up my belongings. I would not remain a moment longer than I could help in this gossiping, scandal-mongering atmosphere. But I must see Hugo before I went away, if only to remind myself that I was "bound and tied and engaged," as I had said to Courtenay during that delightful moonlight drive; and I would go and see him that very afternoon at the private madhouse.

CHAPTER IV.

I DID not tell Miss Warden of my determination until we had started upon our way. Towards the middle of the *Newsky Prospect* I pulled the check-string of the brougham, and directed the coachman to drive to Dr. Schumann's residence. Miss Warden strove in vain to turn me from my purpose by telling me that I should have waited until His Excellency could have accompanied me.

I replied that His Excellency was so much occupied now with other matters that it was unlikely that he would ever be able to

accompany me when, as now, the spirit moved me to visit my husband, and that I preferred, therefore, to go at my own time, although my seeing the Prince must depend, of course, upon the doctor's permission.

We drove on down the long ugly street, which seemed to me upon this occasion to be almost interminable, past the colonnade of the Kazan cathedral and the high walls of the monastery of St. Alexander Newsky, a melancholy-looking pile of white stone in the midst of secluded gardens and surrounded by a moat; and then leaving behind us the gilded cupolas and minarets of the town, we found ourselves in the suburbs. In another ten minutes we had arrived at the doctor's villa. I was ushered at once into a kind of study, where I had waited with the Ambassador upon the occasion of my former visit. Miss Warden, who had accompanied me thus far, expressed surprise at

our having so easily obtained access to the place. It was, she said, just as if our coming had been expected. The doctor's secretary, a German, presented himself in a few minutes. He had seen me before, and knew that I had obtained permission to visit the Prince, supposing that he was able to receive me. He seemed a little surprised at recognising me.

"Ah, madam, it is you!" he said in English. "You can surely see His Highness to-day—he is composed and in good spirits. There is another lady expected presently. I thought she had now arrived."

"A lady to see the Prince!" I exclaimed, in astonishment, scarcely thinking that this could be.

"Yes," answered the secretary; "a lady—a former acquaintance—wishes to visit His Highness; but she has sent us no name, and I was to see her before she could have

permission. The doctor is away for some hours attending a scientific meeting, and those were his orders. He was saying only the other day that if a few former acquaintances, persons who were comparatively indifferent to His Highness, but whose conversation might cheer and enliven him without awakening painful associations, would occasionally visit him it would be beneficial to his health and spirits. This lady was to arrive between three and five o'clock. It is at present nearly four."

I looked at Miss Warden inquiringly. Who, save myself, would be likely to demand an interview with my unfortunate husband? What former female acquaintance would know even of the place of his retreat? No one, I said to myself, except—and here a terrible suspicion flashed across my mind as I thought of Hugo's only remaining kinswoman.

But I dismissed it again almost immediately. No; she would never venture to come here—I thought; her sudden disappearance shows how much she dreaded running the risk of an arrest. This must be some old friend of whom I have never heard! . . .

Nevertheless, the mention of this mysterious visitor had added considerably to the nervousness from which I was already suffering.

The secretary, who, as well as the doctor, had been made acquainted with my secret, apparently attributed my emotion to jealousy.

“Be sure, madame,” he said, “that if this person is no lady—if she should be in any way objectionable—I shall bring her His Highness’s excuses. In any case she will not be permitted to see him alone.”

I thanked him, scarcely knowing what I

said, and he then left us in order to apprise the Prince of my arrival.

He returned in a few minutes, which had been fraught for me with all kinds of conflicting emotions.

“His Highness will see you with pleasure,” he said. “I shall leave you with him apparently alone, retiring to an adjoining room. But I shall merely let fall the *portière* without closing the door; thus, without hearing your conversation, or interrupting it, I shall be close at hand should you require me.”

I was too overcome by my feelings to make any reply, and I followed him with a beating heart to the Prince’s apartments.

Upon being ushered into a large comfortably furnished room, I saw, awaiting me, a strange unfamiliar figure, wearing a grey beard, a long clinging white robe, and gold-rimmed spectacles. I started back alarmed

at this weird apparition. The secretary had disappeared behind the *portière*. Hugo and I were apparently alone together. For a few seconds we confronted one another in silence. My heart was full; I could not have spoken a word had my life depended upon it.

Then, with a kind of low moan like that of some animal in pain, this utter stranger, for so he seemed to me, bearing no resemblance that I could then discover to the man who had been my husband, stretched out his long arms, as I have seen people do in fun when they have wished to frighten children by pretending to be ghosts. They closed tightly round me and I was pressed to his heart. I felt his breast-bone hard and sharp against my bosom. He had grown terribly thin and angular. I thought of the embrace of the spectre-lover and shuddered.

“*At last!*” he exclaimed, with a long-drawn sigh, and then, leading me to a chair, he sat down by my side.

I was in one of those hysterical, oversensitive moods to which we women are occasionally subject, and which seem to most men to be so incomprehensible and ridiculous. I was in want of consolation, and had been vaguely expectant of finding it here in its most sufficing form—that of consoling another. I desired, too, to be protected and shielded against the new and engrossing interest which was springing up in my heart. I had been thinking, during my wintry drive, of that morning at St. Hippolyte, a morning all softness and sunshine, scented with southern blossoms, when I had stood in the old Italian garden and looked up at Hugo’s windows, upon the day when I had come so very near to being in love with him; and of how, responsive

to my unuttered longing, he had flung back the green shutters and stepped out upon the balcony, in his well-fitting grey suit, made by an English tailor; and of how, when he was at my side, he had taken my hand, and had seemed to understand all that was in my heart. I had not recalled what the Ambassador had told me about the change in the Prince's appearance—his long beard, and the strange unearthly dress he had adopted, and had been expecting to see the same man (outwardly, at least) from whom I had been parted so suddenly at Monte Carlo—the man at whom all the prettily-dressed ladies upon the terrace had gazed with eyes of admiration, because he was so handsome and so distinguished-looking.

Now, certainly, the woman whose regard or affection could be shaken on account of any change which might have been wrought

by sorrow or suffering in the appearance of husband, lover, or friend, would seem, at first, to be a creature utterly to be despised. And yet, this same change may so have transformed the man she knew before that he may appear to her altogether in the light of a stranger, to whom she cannot at once transfer the feelings he had previously inspired.

Such was the sad position in which I now found myself. Hugo, as I had known him once, had departed as utterly as if I had seen him lying dead before me, and in his stead had arisen this weird, Druid-like apparition, seeming more like a denizen of another world than a living, breathing creature of flesh and blood! Then, too, I had always nourished quite an unreasonable prejudice against a beard. I did not object to it in its place, but this place seemed to me to be only upon the chins of blind

beggars, early Christians, and Plantagenet kings. My father's beard had changed him so much. Perhaps my prejudice may have originated in my horror of change.

I looked at Hugo, wondering and disheartened. His beautiful eyes were as large and luminous as ever; the dark circles under them had increased, and his features looked even more finely cut than heretofore because of his extreme thinness. There was a peculiar look, however, about his face, as of a death's head, due to the hollowness of the eyes, the breadth of the low brow, and to the accentuation of the upper jaw with its even white teeth, from each side of which the flesh had fallen away; that produced a most painful impression upon me as I gazed at him. When I could speak, I asked him how he came to assume so strange a garb?

He replied (as far as I could afterwards

remember) that, for certain purposes, certain garments had been deemed the most appropriate; the seeker after occult mysteries wearing, in the old days, an ephod of white linen, "because of its abstracted quality for magic," for which purpose his present dress, with some few additions, would be suitable also. He had adopted it however, having in his mind the shrouds of the Sabeian star-worshippers, who had done for ever with the world.

"I, too," he went on, speaking slowly in the old familiar voice which seemed to belong now to another man, "have done altogether with the material world. It was once my most ardent desire to have done with it, years ago, before I saw your beloved face, and now that I have lost you what is left to me but the pursuit of those studies in which I was always interested, and which are invested now with a terrible

importance in my mind ? How much have I yet to learn—how much to investigate ! Had I known more, in the past, of the secret and potent forces which are at times opposed to us, I might not now have been here—a man who is even as one departed, wearing, appropriately, the garments which are reserved for the dead. And yet, may not that which appears at first like a misfortune be converted into a blessing ? This is what I ask myself continually. The answer that comes to me is different according to my different moods.”

“ And to-day, Hugo,” I asked, “ in what mood are you ? Has it made you any happier to see me ? ”

“ Happier and unhappier,” he answered sadly, “ if I may say this without appearing ungrateful. Events have so revolutionised my existence that what would have been a pleasure in former days, becomes, now,

nothing more than a misery and a regret. I can have no part now in the life that you are living; our pathways are distinct and apart, and so they will be to the end. The life which I am endeavouring to live (the *higher life* as I have come to consider it) is disturbed and embarrassed by all that recalls any previous existence; for I am trying to persuade myself that this visitation is only a blessing in disguise, and that had I remained much longer in the world—surrounded by men and women intent upon earthly matters—all of them voluntarily deafening and blinding themselves to the manifestations of the spirit—I must have become altogether materialised and unfitted for anything better. *You*, too, my beloved Helen, my ‘good angel,’ as I used once to call you, you would have assumed for me in time the character of a temptress—with your beauty, your charm, your power of

idealising the prosaic home-life ! Had we remained together any longer in that southern paradise I should have become nothing better than a confirmed voluptuary, sunk in mere sloth and selfish indulgence, from which there would have been no reclaiming me !”

“ And so you would prefer that I did not come to see you ?”

“ That you did not come, Helen, or that you could remain with me always,” he answered, “ and for this reason. Originally, as even *you* must be aware, we possess two distinct natures—the spiritual and the carnal (‘ the human and the divine,’ should you prefer these terms)—which are for ever warring with one another in our veins. Hence arise discord, confusion, and the dangerous agents we speak of as ‘ passion ’ and ‘ impulse.’ I am endeavouring now to separate these two incongruous com-

panions—these restless combatants—and to cast one of them utterly away from me so that one alone, the purer and calmer influence, may remain in possession of the citadel, where all would then be harmony and contentment. The sight of you, together with all the memories that come to me in your presence, must prevent or retard the accomplishment of this dream. You understand me, my Helen? As a man, I long for, and desire, your presence, but I have done now with the life of a man, and everything that recalls it is dangerous to the development of the spirit.”

“No doubt the calmer and purer life, if one could only attain to it, would be happier than this perpetual struggle!” I said, my thoughts wandering away to the struggles and temptations that lay in my own path.

“To me it would of necessity be happier,”

he answered, still speaking very seriously. "It is true that my physical action is controlled, but my spiritual existence is free and uncircumscribed. No vampires can sap the vitality of this better life which I might enjoy to the fullest, looking down upon the material life as though from a mountain. Below me I should see the little struggling world that I used to inhabit—the small square green fields, all cut up and apportioned, with the flocks and herds scattered upon them looking like white dots. The cities, too, and the little men and women, seeming no bigger than tiny black flies, now holding themselves aloof one from the other, now swarming and buzzing together for some futile purpose, whilst I should be far, far above them all, in an atmosphere favourable to the development of a perfect mental and moral hygiene, and to the

nearer contemplation of the most important mysteries."

He continued talking for some time in this strain, making use of many names and expressions which I could not afterwards remember. He was in want, he said, of books bearing upon the subjects in which he was interested.

"For see," continued he, "to what I am reduced!" and he pointed to several books which were lying scattered about upon the tables—"to Jacob Behmen, Claude de Saint Martin, and Kirchberger; to Johann Valentin Andreas, and the 'god-illuminated fraternity of the Rosicrucians!' But of the records of modern research, of the outcome of modern intelligence, nothing, absolutely nothing!"

He alluded then to several works upon mesmerism, spiritualism, and what he

termed "the secret hermetic science," and wrote down a list of books which he wished me to obtain for him in London, from a bookseller in Covent Garden. He took up a volume which lay open upon a writing-table, and from which he said he had been reading when my arrival had been announced to him. It was called "*Le Comte de Gabalis, ou entretiens sur les Sciences Secretes.*"

"An obsolete work," he explained, "which I had just opened, merely for mental relaxation, but which contains, nevertheless, the rudiments of much sound teaching. Confess, Helen, that it was strange that, just as I finished reading this passage, I should have been informed of your arrival!"

He re-assumed the gold spectacles which he had been wearing when I entered the room, and read aloud a few paragraphs

from the pages before him. I gathered from these that the author of the work disapproved altogether of woman's influence, to which he seemed to attribute all the ills which have accrued to the human race ever since the fall of Adam. "Man," according to the *Comte de Gabalis*, "should endeavour to ally himself only with nymphs, sylphides, and the elemental spirits."

"In these opinions," remarked the Prince, smiling sadly, "I am endeavouring to become a disciple of the old Rosicrucian!"

I perceived now that, as the Ambassador had said, the Prince was not changed in anything but appearance. To use Lord Silchester's words, he was "no more mad now" than he had been when I had met him for the first time. As then, he was quiet, gentle, serious, and somewhat stilted in his mode of expression; but yet, because of this mere external difference, which I

suppose ought to have counted for very little with any reasonable woman, it was as though the Hugo of the Villa St. Hippolyte was dead and buried to me for ever. This new man, albeit speaking with the dead Hugo's voice and sharing in all his extraordinary opinions, could never do me the service I had come, unconsciously, to crave of him. He could never become, however much I might strive to delude myself upon the subject, the rival, the vanquisher of that other encroaching influence. It asserted itself as strongly, nay, more strongly than ever, even now as I was sitting by his side. And *he*, too—he had just confessed it—was striving hard to drive me out of his heart. My visits could make him no happier; they had, indeed, rather a tendency the other way; whilst to me they could bring only a fresh consciousness of my misery.

Why did I ever come to Petersburg at all ?

We conversed for some time longer upon different subjects—the climate of St. Petersburg, the establishment maintained for the Prince by Dr. Schumann—and then I was again reminded not to forget to obtain the books upon my return to England.

Hugo made no direct allusion to the subject of his crime, nor did he do more than refer vaguely to the birth and death of our child. I was conscious that all this was in his mind, however. Perhaps he could not trust himself to speak about it.

“ You understand ? ” was all he said, looking at me very earnestly. “ You understand and forgive, since your mind can realise that there are mysteries of impulse and inspiration that cannot now be fathomed or explained. And *I*, too, my Helen, *I understand*, and am grateful to you for every-

thing—for all that you have endured and suffered—for more than I am able to speak about now ! ”

When I bade him farewell tears, as of tenderness and regret, came into his large luminous eyes. *I*, too, was profoundly affected. He took my hand, and seemed to be about to raise it to his lips. He dropped it, however, almost immediately, as though it had been a scorpion. I could only think that this sudden movement had something to do with the Count de Gabalis and the Rosicrucians. But it appeared that I was wrong.

“ You are not desiring to turn me from any good purpose ? ” he asked, anxiously and in an altered voice. “ You did not come here with an unfriendly disposition towards me in your heart ? ”

“ No, Hugo,” I answered in surprise, “ you must know that I have no unfriendly

feeling ! You have just said that I could understand and forgive. Why did I come to Petersburg at all if not to comfort and cheer you ? ”

“ That is well,” he replied, still speaking as with nervous anxiety ; “ but at that moment, just as I came nearer to you, I was conscious of an influence that was formidable and sinister—of a will that would strive cruelly and mercilessly against mine, obtaining in the end the dominion ; of a spiritual danger, in fact, which seems still to be menacing and advancing. I must be upon my guard ! ”

He shuddered, and then paced restlessly up and down the apartment. As he came towards me I perceived that the expression of calm resignation which I had previously observed upon his face had entirely vanished. He had grown pale and miserable-looking in a moment !

I made every endeavour to reassure him. He did not appear to hear me, however, but continued pacing up and down as though in the greatest alarm and agitation. I watched him for some time in silence, not knowing what further to say, and then, fearing that this strange conduct might be, perhaps, the forerunner of some sort of nervous crisis, I took advantage of the moment when his back was towards me to push aside the *portière*, and before he had turned to confront me again we were joined by the doctor's secretary, in whose presence I again bade him farewell.

Miss Warden, when I rejoined her, was all impatience to hear an account of my interview. But I could hardly speak from emotion, and so entreated her to leave me in peace for awhile. She regretted that I had come at all, and implored me to control myself lest it should be remarked at the

ball that I had been weeping. I felt hopeless, rudderless, desolate. It seemed to me that I now stood entirely alone in the world, subject to all the buffets of fate, to all the assaults of temptation. The sight of poor Hugo had in no way aggravated my position, of course, but it had brought vividly before me certain stern facts that I had lately been foolish enough at times to ignore. I was "bound and tied" indeed, and to a being to whom I could be of no comfort or service whatsoever. It was not possible for me, even if I had ever really loved him (and about this I was becoming more and more doubtful every day), to feel for him now any sentiment warmer than a melancholy compassion. Nay, had tenderer emotions arisen in my breast at sight of him, Hugo himself would probably have been the first to repel them, since he had decided to cast from him all human

affections. And yet, whilst he and I continued to exist upon this miserable earth, I could love no other man without committing a deadly sin !

As soon as the door of the brougham was closed upon us I buried my face in my hands, and gave free vent to my tears. I was aroused, before we had reached the lodge of the *concierge*, by a sound of approaching wheels, and soon afterwards, a close carriage passed us, driven with great speed up the approach.

I looked out eagerly, thinking that this must be the mysterious lady who had wished for an interview with the Prince, and whose existence I had, for the moment, entirely forgotten. But the carriage window, upon the side nearest to us, was closed, and all that I could distinguish, in a momentary glance, was a woman's neatly gloved hand holding a large bunch of yellow mimosa.

CHAPTER VI.

UPON reaching the Embassy I went at once to my bed-room. Mason was there, setting out my things for the evening. My black dress and starred veil were lying upon the bed, but I took no heed of them. Mason, a sensible, discreet woman of nearly sixty, as far as one could judge by her appearance, was, as I have already said, entirely in my confidence. She had been like a second mother to me ever since the days of my earliest childhood, and it was my intention, upon the morrow, to tell her all about my visit to my husband. *Now*, however, I felt

in no mood for conversation. Mason, herself, was of a reserved and quiet disposition, and well accustomed to my frequent fits of depression. She assisted me to take off my hat and cloak in silence, after which I threw myself into an arm-chair, and a prey to my own melancholy reflections, soon forgot that I was not alone in the room. I started, therefore, in a few minutes, at hearing my maid's voice—

“A curious thing has happened this afternoon, Miss Helen,” she said; it was by this name that she had been told to continue to address me—“and as there may be more in it than I can see, I should wish you to know of it. I'm afraid you may think, perhaps, that I said too much, but I was completely thrown off my guard. I have thought to myself since, however, that even if anybody *did* find out who you are, there would be no such very great harm, after all,

particularly as we hope to be going away from here so soon."

I turned to where she was standing, and saw that she held in her hand the *bouquet* I was to carry at the ball. This was a real triumph of the florist's skill. Flowers arranged more naturally would have looked much prettier, I thought; but then this *bouquet* was intended to be symbolical. The crescent moon, so indispensable as an accessory of "Night," embracing a single star, was ingeniously picked out in white violets upon a ground composed of the purple variety. The whole was surrounded by delicate hothouse ferns, and was so large and heavy that I wondered how I should be able to bear the burden of it for the whole evening.

"This hadn't been sent home by the afternoon," Mason continued; "it was promised at three o'clock, to make sure, as

the tradespeople here seem to be very unpunctual, and so, as Miss Warden wanted one or two little things, I went out with one of the girls, and looked in at the flower-shop, to hurry them, on my way back, as they told me the people there spoke English. There were two ladies in the shop when we went in, beautifully dressed both of them, speaking French, and looking over the flowers. I saw your nosegay in the window, with several others, set out for the whole town to stare at, and I pointed it out to the flower-woman. Not understanding me, and thinking that I wanted to buy it, she said that it was for the young lady at the British Embassy, who was going to the ball as "Night." I tried to make her understand that I wanted to take it away with me, so as to have it in good time, as there was to be a dinner-party first, and you would be sure to dress early. Then, one of

the ladies, who must have heard everything I said, came forward, and explained to the woman in French, and she then allowed me to have the *bouquet* after I had written down my name in a book. All this time the ladies seemed to be watching me, and I was wishing that I could have a good look at them, in a better light, because the face of the one who had spoken to me seemed to be so very familiar, and her voice, too; and yet, at first, I could not remember who she was so like. Then it all came back to my mind, but I thought to myself that it was quite impossible—that she was so beautifully dressed, and looked quite like a lady, and that I must be mistaken, as all French people were a good deal alike. Before I went out of the shop she turned and said something to the other lady, after having read my name, as I suppose, in the book—for I had written down my own name in-

stead of 'Miss Collingwood,' which I thought best not to put upon paper if I could avoid it, under the circumstances, and then, to my surprise, she came running after me, and said, in quite a pleasant, friendly kind of way, 'Good day to you, Mrs. Mason! evidently you have not a good memory for your old friends!' and she laughed, and showed her white teeth, and then I saw that she was no other than the person I had fancied she was at first, your poor mama's French maid, '*Ma'mselle*,' as we used to call her, that was with her ladyship at the time of her death. You were too young to be able to remember her."

I have just said that Mason was entirely in my confidence; perhaps I used the word "entirely" unadvisedly. She knew this much, at least, that I had been privately married to Prince Crecszoleski—that I had become a mother—that my husband had

been arrested and accused of a crime—that he had been since declared to be irresponsible for his actions, and that, on this account, I was anxious, during my sojourn at St. Petersburg, to drop the name and title which were mine by right, but which were now fraught with so many painful associations. Of the occult mysteries, the complicated ramifications, the “wheels within wheels,” [which were connected with my strange story, she knew nothing whatsoever. How could her simple mind have grasped the full significance of the twin brothers’ prophetic dream, or of poor Hugo’s dominated “volitional power”? Of my terrible suspicions with regard to Celestine Vigon she, likewise, knew nothing, for, as yet, they were suspicions only, which, at this distance of time, I saw no possibility of proving. Mason, therefore, could have known of no reason why the name of the

Frenchwoman should sound hateful for all time in my ears. She was merely vexed to think that, taken unawares, she had led Celestine to understand that I was residing at the British Embassy, and that she might have betrayed to her the fact that I was not really "Miss Collingwood."

"For I knew" (she went on) "that you so particularly wished everything to be kept secret now that Sir Courtenay has come out here, but not expecting to see *Ma'mselle*, and dressed just like a lady, too!—I was completely taken by surprise. 'I suppose, *Ma'mselle*' (I said), 'that you must have got married?' and she looked first at the other lady and laughed, and then she said, 'Yes, yes, of course I am married! I have got now quite another name! And your little young lady, Miss Nelly' (she said), 'has she not found a husband by this time? And I was so put off my guard by this ques-

tion that I'm afraid I must have looked quite foolish. First I said 'Yes,' and then 'No,' and then I very stupidly said, 'These flowers are for Miss Nelly,—she will carry them to-night at the ball,' and then the other lady stepped forward and said in English, 'They are for the young lady who is staying with the English Ambassador?' and she was such a fine, proud-looking lady (a *real* lady, I feel sure this one was), and she looked at me so hard, that I felt I must answer 'Yes,' whether I wished it or no. I was quite provoked with myself afterwards, but it seemed all to have happened before I had had time to take thought! Since then I have been saying to myself, however, that perhaps it didn't so very much signify after all, as you expect to be going back to England so soon, and I daresay I shall never hear of her again. She isn't likely, now that she's married, and fancies herself quite

a lady, to come here and pay a visit to one of the servants, and she knows quite well that you would never remember her ! ”

“ I remember her perfectly,” I said, and the face of the Frenchwoman, with her regular, somewhat massive features, her white teeth, and long gold earrings, rose up before me as vividly as when I had last beheld it in the flesh. “ But the other lady,” I inquired anxiously, “ the lady who asked you whether I was not staying with the Ambassador, what was she like ? I have a reason for wishing you to describe her to me exactly.”

“ That, I’m afraid, miss, I shall never be able to do,” replied Mason, who seemed, nevertheless, to be recalling her impressions, “ for she wore a thick black veil over the top part of her face, with a border which was ever so much thicker still, so that I could only see her eyes, looking through at me

very hard, but what coloured eyes they were I can't say, I'm sure. Her nose wasn't a hooked nose, of that I could make certain, because her veil hung straight down over it, and when she smiled I could see that she had very even white teeth. Her figure was tall and fine, and she wore a long brown velvet cloak trimmed with beautiful fur, and a cap of the same fur upon her head. I saw her hair at the back of it—very dark hair indeed—done up in thick black coils—but most of the time she was smelling at a large bunch of that sweet drooping yellow stuff that used to grow in the garden at Nice—I suppose here it must be raised in a hothouse—and what with that and the veil I couldn't manage to see much of her face."

She had seen quite enough, however, to fill me with all kinds of sinister forebodings. I cross-examined her as to the hour at which

she had visited the flower-shop. As far as she could judge, she said, it must have been very nearly four o'clock. She had gone straight back afterwards to the Embassy, where tea was always served in English fashion punctually at five, and she was not told that it was ready until some time after her return.

This served but to confirm my apprehensions. No wonder that poor Hugo had been conscious of the approach of some formidable and sinister influence! At that moment I must have been just entering Dr. Schumann's waiting-room. My interview with Hugo, although it had seemed to me to be almost interminable, could not have lasted much more than half-an-hour; the drive from the flower-shop to the doctor's villa would have occupied about the same space of time, and it was not five o'clock by Miss Warden's watch when the brougham with the high-stepping horses had dashed

past us, at the closed window of which I had descried a woman's gloved hand holding a large bouquet of mimosa; the "sweet drooping, yellow stuff," which, as Mason said, used to grow in the garden—that well-remembered garden!—at Nice. And yet I was perfectly certain that both Hugo and Lord Silchester had described Countess Dobrowolska as a fair woman with very light hair. In the "thick black coils" to which Mason had alluded, there lurked the materials for still further mystification!

CHAPTER VI.

By half-past eleven o'clock nearly all the most distinguished of the Ambassador's guests had arrived. I stood at the entrance of the ball-room, behind my enormous *bouquet*, where I was presented by His Excellency to the Emperor and two of the Grand Dukes who accompanied him. The emperor conversed with me for a few minutes, and then invited me to dance the opening quadrille.

I did not remember at the moment that this act on the part of His Imperial Majesty

was what Miss Warden had looked to as an effectual means of silencing the voices of my detractors, until the face of Mr. Morrison, wearing an expression of impertinent wonder, recalled the fact to my memory.

There is no need for me to describe the ill-fated Alexander II. To most of my readers his countenance will be familiar through his portraits. To me, the face was an interesting one. I have fancied since that I could perceive upon it a look as of predestination to a tragic doom, which was afterwards so cruelly fulfilled, but one is apt, sometimes, to imagine these things afterwards. I knew through Lord Silchester that the Czar was acquainted with my story. He made no allusion to it, however, during the dance, but whilst conducting me back to my place near the doorway, he remarked very gravely, speaking in French :

“I am charmed to have made your acquaintance, madame. The family of your husband has always been loyal to us. I hope Prince Creczoleski resigns himself with courage to his misfortunes?”

I suppose that I made some sort of becoming answer, but just at that moment I had discovered that Courtenay Davenant, in his Guards' uniform, was standing quite close at hand, looking at me sadly and earnestly with his dark eyes. My heart seemed suddenly to stand still and ache in my breast. I do not know how I could have found words to reply to the Emperor at all.

We women are too apt to suppose that a man, upon certain occasions, will behave precisely as we should behave ourselves, and when, as generally happens, he acts upon an entirely different system, our disappointment and mortification often reach a pitch

which he is utterly unable to comprehend or account for.

Judging by myself, I fancied that I knew, now, exactly what Courtenay would do. He would not approach me, of course, whilst I was upon the arm of the Czar, but he would hover close at hand, watching his opportunity, and when it came he would engage me for a dance. This, however, would be merely a pretext. Probably, we should not dance at all. He would lead me away upon his arm, through the whole suite of brilliantly lighted rooms, to one of the most retired of the smaller apartments beyond, and here, perhaps, though how I knew not, I might be able—in the course of our conversation—to refute some of the malicious insinuations which had reached his ears. I might say, at any rate, that one ought not to believe all the idle stories one heard, and that there were people in the

world who seemed to make it their business to "fetch and carry" and invent untruths. Woman-like, I next set about composing some sort of answer upon his part—words such as I hoped he would say—something kind and chivalrous, of course, with a touch of gentle reproach at the notion that I could ever have imagined him capable of believing anything to my disadvantage. It is always dangerous to go on thus, making so certain that the breasts of others are aglow with our own peculiar emotions, and that expression will be given to them in words, after our own hearts!

The Emperor left me with a stiff bow, whilst I was in the midst of these reflections. He turned to address a Russian lady in gorgeous national costume. I was now free, and Courtenay would be able to come forward and speak to me if he liked.

I cast a hurried glance at one of the long looking-glasses with which the ball-room was almost entirely surrounded, and was pleased, on the whole, with what I beheld, and glad to think that I had resisted all persuasions to appear in any more garish costume. Severe and subdued as my dress was, it stood relieved against those of the brilliant company, and thus had the advantage of being unostentatiously remarkable. Lord Silchester's family diamonds, too, looked beautiful. Even in the midst of the splendid jewels which shone upon every side they held their own. What with my black dress, and these glittering stars, Courtenay would have no difficulty in singling me out from the crowd whenever he wanted to find me. Probably he was making his way to me now.

I glanced anxiously towards the place where I had seen him standing, but could

not perceive him. I did not allow myself to feel disappointed, so certain did I feel that he would come and seek for me soon. I was only fearful lest, in the meantime, some one would invite me to dance whom I might not be able to refuse, and that, thus, the moment of our meeting might be delayed. This was just what happened. I perceived the Ambassador making his way towards me accompanied by a male figure in some manner of grotesque costume, which I should have found it difficult to explain had not His Excellency presented to me, forthwith, a Polish Count, personating for the evening, as he at once informed me, "*Charles trois, Roi d'Angleterre*," more commonly described as "the Young Pretender," whence I assumed that his strange garb was intended to represent a kilt.

"He is one of the greatest bores in Russia," the Ambassador whispered in my

ear, "but try and endure him for a little while!"

I am afraid that just then the most brilliant of human beings must have seemed to me to be a "bore," so entirely was my mind preoccupied!

We walked off together, down to the further end of the ball-room; for, embarrassed as the Count was with kilt, philibeg, and claymore, and *I*, with my long floating veil, we agreed that it would be unwise to attempt to dance in such a crowd. Some remarks which I made upon my companion's costume — quite absently and abstractedly, my eyes roving about from right to left in search of a scarlet uniform—led him to speak of the unfortunate Prince he was personating. He could boast, he said, of some of the blood of the Sobieskis. He possessed several interesting Jacobite relics, which he would

be very pleased to show me at some future day. The dress he was wearing upon the present occasion was accurately copied from an authentic Scotch medal, on the reverse of which was a figure of Victory blowing a trumpet, and flying over London with a crown in her left hand. . . I listened to all this like one in a dream. At any other time I should have been much interested in the Count's conversation, for, like most young and romantic persons, I was an enthusiastic admirer of the Stuarts, perhaps because I had not been destined to live beneath their sway, and, even as it was, my acquaintance with their history enabled me to say a word, here and there, to the purpose, notwithstanding my wandering thoughts.

After walking about for a while, we established ourselves upon a sofa, whence we could look down the entire length of

the room, which had now become very much crowded. Two thousand people had been invited, very few of whom had excused themselves, and the supper-room had not yet been opened. The scene was dazzling in its brilliancy, though somewhat bewildering, also, by reason of its incongruity. This cannot fail to be the case at a fancy ball where hardly any restrictions have been imposed with regard to the character or epoch of the dresses ; and, in this instance, Lord Silchester had only begged his guests to adhere to two conditions. He knew an Englishman who had once given great offence, abroad, by appearing at a fancy ball dressed as the Devil ; and an English lady who, going into the other extreme, had outraged continental susceptibilities by assuming the becoming garb of a nun. So monks, nuns, priests, and devils, had been tabooed ; but person-

ages in modern uniforms—naval, military, and diplomatic — brigands, picturesque peasants, *pierrots*, and French *chefs*, were mingling heterogeneously with Roman Emperors, Egyptian Queens, Crusaders, Watteau shepherdesses, and allegorical impersonations. In truth, a motley crew!

As I was seeking vainly for Courtenay amongst all these, a figure, wearing a black domino, came up to where we were sitting, and endeavoured to mystify us by the making of strange signs and gestures. Rather a short man—I could see this at once, as only his feet were visible below the sombre folds of his disguise. My heart did not beat any faster, therefore; I knew that this could not be the one I was so longing to see. All the same, I felt a little frightened. A domino—whatever its colour—is, I think, a very hideous dress. This one, with its ghastly black mask,

reminded me of the discarded stuffed bat.

“ *C’est un Anglais,*” whispered the “ Young Pretender,” glancing down at the stranger’s boots, and perceiving, I suppose, something insular about them.

“ Ah, the chaste Diana with her crescent moon ! ” exclaimed the “ mask,” in a squeaky voice, which was evidently assumed.

“ Who are you ? ” I asked, shrinking away from him with an involuntary feeling of horror.

“ A friend,” answered the squeaky voice, “ one who knows more about you than you would think. I can tell you who gave you those beautiful diamonds.”

Something in the tone in which these words were pronounced made me recognise the voice of Mr. Morrison. I felt indignant that this man, after having maligned me

behind my back, should venture thus to banter me familiarly in public. The warm blood came into my cheeks as I replied—

“You are no friend ; you are an enemy ; an enemy of the most treacherous and dangerous kind ! You slander those who have never injured you, when they are powerless to defend themselves. I pity those who have many friends like you ! ”

The words seemed to strike home. He withdrew precipitately, and was soon lost in the crowd.

“You ought not to be so angry, *mademoiselle !* ” said my kilted companion, in French, looking at me in reproachful wonder, “*ce n’est que du persiflage !* ”

He understood English, although unable to speak it, and appeared astonished at my warmth.

I returned to where I had received the company, as soon as I was free from “one of the greatest bores in Russia.”

Poor man ! the Ambassador informed me afterwards, that he had found me “ charming.” He must have been very indulgent, I thought, and very easily pleased !

So the miserable evening dragged on. I had been conducted to supper by the Emperor, where I had made a pretence of eating and drinking. Afterwards, I had made a pretence of dancing; and of talking with various people who appeared to me like so many hollow phantoms. Everything seemed to have grown shadowy and unreal, and far off, except the eager yearning at my heart. I kept on wondering whether I might not be merely dreaming one of those provoking, uncomfortable dreams where nothing will ever come right; where the doors persistently refuse to shut, and the windows to open; where letters arrive which are impossible to decipher; dresses which, somehow, cannot be made to fit, and where all the people

we love best in the world seem to turn suddenly into our bitterest foes. And, all the while, the music — the passionate, maddening, disconsolate, music; sounding joyful, no doubt, to other ears; but, to mine melancholy as the wailing of disembodied spirits at midnight, and “wild with all regret,”—went on rising, and swelling, and dying, in pathetic, lingering minor cadences, and thrilling me to the very depths of my being, until it was with difficulty that I could restrain myself from breaking down and sobbing aloud.

As I passed out of the supper-room, in the royal procession, I had come face to face with the man for whom I was seeking. A pretty girl, wearing patches and powder, was upon his arm. He was smiling at something she was saying, so *he*, at least, was not unhappy! They drew to one side, and both bowed low to the Czar. I looked

eagerly and miserably into Courtenay's face when he lifted his eyes. For an instant they met my own. He must have read in them something of the desolation that was in my heart. But then, the Imperial personages had passed on—and I along with them — and he and his powdered shepherdess had gone on their way to supper. Since then he had never approached me ; and now the Emperor and his suite had departed and I heard people saying that the real amusement of the evening was only now about to begin.

“ *Amusement !* ” I thought, bitterly. “ Yes, I suppose, after a fashion, all these people are amusing themselves ! Their hearts are filled with bright and pleasant impressions. To-morrow there will be long accounts in the newspapers, descriptive of the splendours of the entertainment, and everybody we meet will congratulate us

upon its success ! And yet, to me, what an evening of gloom and disappointment ! How shall I ever be able to endure it to the end, if, as I have heard, it is likely to go on until the small hours of the morning ? How shall I think of it ever afterwards without the keenest misery and humiliation ?” And then, the worst of it was, I had felt so certain that Courtenay would have behaved altogether differently. The man who, only such a short while ago, had professed for me so much love and admiration, surely his heart could not have become estranged so soon ! Why had he slighted me thus to-night, and behaved to me almost as though I had been an enemy, and given me all this unnecessary pain ?

I daresay that almost every woman will be able to understand why I felt so forlorn and miserable ; whilst to a man it may appear strange that I should have made so

much of so little ; and that this different way of looking at things springs merely from the difference in our natures. It pervades everything, I suppose, and accounts for many things that we women weep over and lament for, and often even break our hearts about !

The ball-room had thinned considerably now ; many of the guests were doubtless regaling themselves at the supper-table. Others had retired to slip on dominos, for purposes of mystification.

I stood aloof, near to the door by which the company had arrived—a part of the room which was now well-nigh deserted—feeling in no mood for conversation. Here I again caught sight of myself in one of the long mirrors, and was quite startled at the change which some two hours of anxiety and disappointment had wrought in my appearance. I looked now haggard and

miserable. My black and silver dress, too, presented quite a funereal aspect ; the flowers and ferns in my *bouquet* were drooping and faded ; and my diamond stars were twinkling, as though in mockery, over my pale cheeks and hopeless eyes. Nothing that I had passed through “ ’twixt matins and evensong ” had ever affected me like this !

I know not wherefore, as I stood thus, contemplating this melancholy image, I should have travelled back, in fancy, to the evening of my first ball at Ingleby Grange ; but so it was ; and then I set to work, and began to make foolish, unprofitable comparisons, such as we women cannot resist making sometimes. I thought of the handsome, distinguished-looking Polish Prince, as I had seen him then—faultlessly attired—with his expression of sadness and intellectual weariness—who had paid me the

compliment of falling in love with me on the spot, when I was only nineteen years old—an inexperienced country girl, in a plain white dress, with only a natural flower in my hair. “Marriage, affection” (he had said) had not entered into the programme of his existence; till then all women had seemed to him “like dolls.” He was the votary of mysticism—a student of occult science. How strong, therefore, must have been the affection, the admiration, the regard, which could cause such a man to change the whole plan of his life for me! How little of that love (I was fully aware of this now) had I ever given him back—even in the days which preceded all knowledge of what had now estranged me from him for ever! I had always kept, as it were, a watch over my heart, lest it should make the supreme surrender. Was I keeping it (I now asked myself, bitterly) for this cruel,

ungrateful man, who was making me suffer? He had spoken words of love to me—looking upon me, no doubt, as an easy victim—during a midnight drive in a sledge, just to make the time pass agreeably and to play at sentiment; and now here was I—arrayed with so much trouble to seem pleasing in his eyes—slighted and humiliated by him in public; for surely, being almost in the position of his hostess for the evening, it was his duty, even supposing that he had hated me, to address to me a few words out of common politeness.

“Poor Hugo!” I murmured, half aloud, tears coming to my eyes, “it was ungrateful of me not to care for you more, before I knew—before everything! You are gone now, you are changed, I can never make you any reparation, but you are avenged, you are avenged! I am as lonely, as forsaken, as unloved as you are!”

For an instant my heart seemed to go forth to my husband in tenderness, compassion, and remorse. Then a wind, cold as a blast from an iceberg, passed over my bare shoulders, and Hugo's image appeared before me in the glass—the Hugo of to-day, not the good-looking, carefully attired Prince, of Ingleby Grange, standing spectral and Druid-like at my elbow, wrapped in the long white shroud of the Sabean star-worshippers, who have done for ever with the world and the flesh. He seemed to gaze at me earnestly with his hollow luminous eyes,—I saw stains of blood upon his grizzled beard,—the beard that had changed him into another man,—then the form faded away from the looking-glass, and I saw in its place a white domino, capering across it, with a little flower-girl, all decked out with roses and crimson ribands. These figures no doubt, flitting thus, before eyes that were

swimming with tears, had suggested that ghastly apparition. But it was as well, I said to myself, bitterly, that I should be reminded of its existence! My disordered imagination had not evoked it one second too soon, for to what wickedness and vanity was I not falling a prey! Tricked out in jewels and finery, I was assisting at a gorgeous pageant, and making comparisons, in my folly, between the sentiments of two different men, as though they were both my aspiring suitors; to one of these I had been married once, from both of them I was divided, now, by insurmountable obstacles. How could it signify to me what their feelings for me might be? One of them was as dead to me, now, as though he had never existed at all, and yet, because of him, the other must be rooted out of my heart and become dead to me too and I, miserable, deluded woman that I was, what business

had I to breathe the same air, and clothe myself in the same sort of raiment as happy, careless people? Ought I not, rather, to cover myself with sackcloth and ashes; to assume, like my unfortunate husband, the dress of one who has abjured for ever the joys and sorrows of mortality ?

After giving way to these gloomy reflections, I went towards where most of the dancers were congregated, feeling somewhat calmed and chastened in spirit, reproved, as it were, from On High, for my presumptuous folly.

CHAPTER VIII.

BUT alas, how fleeting, how futile, are the wisest resolutions of woman ! And what a strange, perverse, incomprehensible creature man is, also, even at his best ! . . .

Now, when I stood listlessly looking on at the dancers, feeling like

“ A phantom among men—companionless
As the last cloud of an expiring storm ; ”

when I had made up my mind that I ought to go about—like the Sabeen fanatics—wrapped up in a winding-sheet ; when my heart had beaten and battered itself into a state of numb resignation ; and when the

gaiety, and enjoyment, and interest, seemed to have been entirely banished from the evening's entertainment, I turned to find that Courtenay Davenant—the man who had been the cause of all my misery—was standing at my side, wearing an expression which told me that he was utterly unconscious of having offended.

“ You have been enjoying yourself, Miss Collingwood, I hope ? ” he said, looking down at me kindly, but *only* kindly, as I thought. “ You must be very pleased with the way in which everything has gone off. It has been a great success.”

I could scarcely trust myself to reply to such trivial words, but managed at last to murmur something equally common-place. Then he asked me if he might “ have the honour of a dance,—this valse, perhaps ? ”

It would be useless for me to attempt to describe here the revulsion of feeling which

followed upon this simple request ; the effect produced upon me by the intoxicating strains of the music—transformed now into what seemed like the music of the spheres ; or to dwell upon the many mingling emotions which combined to make up a total of absolute enchantment, when I found myself once more in the presence of the being I so unwisely loved. Since this time, of which I am writing, I have thought much and read much. I fancy that I must certainly have grown a good deal wiser ; that I ought to have become more cultured and philosophical. And yet, the result of all my thinking, my reading, my worldly experience, has been to lead me to conclusions which many will regard as lawless and reprehensible. I have fallen in with so many hapless human beings—though often ignorant altogether of their misfortune, and fenced round with shields of self-complacency—

who have never experienced, who never could be brought to experience, the divine mystery of love in its highest, or even in its *lowest*, sense—that I have come to esteem what is so rare, so inexpressibly difficult to realise in all its intensity, as something supreme and excellent indeed—come whenever it may—be it wisely or unwisely enjoyed—and those few to whom the revelation has been vouchsafed as beings in the highest degree favoured and privileged.

I could not tell, of course, whether Courtenay perceived how changed everything had suddenly become for me. He spoke little, and merely in formal and conventional phrases. But I was thinking of what he had said to me on our way home from the gipsy-camp, and striving to detect in his voice some echo of those passionate words. He led the way from the ball-room towards one of the less frequented apartments as

soon as our valse was over. I made up my mind that he was about to allude to the ill-natured stories he had heard concerning me, and that this would give me an opportunity of contradicting them. My heart began beating very fast as I wondered how I should be able to do this. Perhaps, I thought, it might be better to put an end to all these concealments and mystifications at once, by revealing myself to him then and there, and saying simply—

“I am your cousin Nelly, the poor girl you ignored and neglected in the old days. The English Ambassador—our host, my godfather, my dead parents’ old friend—has taken compassion upon my orphaned state, and treats me like a daughter. This is how it happens that I am here, and that, by a series of strange coincidences, we meet at last! But I am the wife, now, of another man. My husband is shut up, and supposed

to be mad ; but his madness cannot give me my freedom. It is too late, therefore, now, to think of carrying out our family marriage project !”

Something of this kind I would endeavour to say, if only I could muster the necessary courage. But before this imaginary explanation could take place, we came upon Lord Silchester in the corridor. He was walking with some Russian officers in imposing uniforms, their breasts glittering with decorations.

I was struck, the moment I saw him, with the expression of his countenance. He looked pale, agitated, fatigued ; older by several years, as I fancied, than when I had seen him only a little while ago.

By a familiar gesture he signified that he had something to say to me. I left Courtenay’s arm, and went to him at once. “I have been looking for you, Helen,” he

said, in a hurried undertone, “to warn you that some ill-advised and foolish people are going about, disguised in masks and dominos, saying all sorts of unpleasant and impertinent things to whoever will listen to them. It is difficult to prevent these follies at masked balls, but I trust they won’t venture to endeavour to annoy *you*. If they should, pass on, and take no notice of them. Above all, don’t be tempted to bandy words with them !”

I was relieved to think that this was all that he had to say to me. From his face, I had almost expected to hear of the discovery of some new plot to assassinate the Emperor. “There is nothing worse than this ?” I inquired ; “no bad news ? You are not feeling ill ?”

“No, no,” he answered, with what I fancied was rather a forced smile, “the supper-room was rather hot and crowded.

I felt it a little oppressive, but I am all right now," and he went on towards the entrance to the ball-room.

I rejoined my partner, and we turned together into an ante-room which had been fitted up as a tea-room. It was beautifully decorated with flowers, and lit with shaded candles. A door at the further end of it communicated with the ball-room, through which we could perceive in the distance the gorgeous and grotesque figures of the dancers. There were but few people in this apartment when we entered it, mere birds of passage, making their way, tricked out in their gay plumage, to the ball-room. We sat down together upon a low divan which was almost screened by the door at which we had entered.

"Lord Silchester is looking dreadfully pale and tired," I remarked, merely for the sake of saying something.

“ I didn’t notice that he looked paler than usual,” answered my companion. “ No doubt, however, I did not observe him as attentively as you did. He is your uncle, I believe ? ” he added suddenly, looking into my face with what I thought was quite an inquisitorial expression.

“ No, he is not my uncle,” I replied, hesitatingly, for I was thinking of the revelation of kinship which I was about to make to him, and was anxious not to forestall it.

“ I fancied,” returned Courtenay, “ that I had heard that he was either your uncle or some very near relation ? ”

He spoke, I thought, very coldly and carelessly—but then I was still dwelling, in imagination, upon the tender words he had spoken in the sledge.

“ Lord Silchester is the dearest and kindest friend that remains to me in the

world," I replied. "He has known me for years, but we are not related to each other."

"I thought not," said Courtenay, still preserving the same hard and indifferent manner. "It is evident, however, that he takes the greatest possible interest in you."

I looked into my companion's dark eyes inquiringly, feeling an irrepressible chill at my heart. What new form of torture was this? Was this the man with whom I had driven through the snow-bound moonlit forests only a few nights ago, and who had seemed, then, to be so overflowing with sympathy, and tenderness, and respectful consideration?

But before I had time to proceed further with these reflections, my attention was suddenly arrested by the sight of two female figures, who, without apparently perceiving us in our sequestered nook, had

glided past us to the tea-table. They were standing there now, with their backs towards us, two tall, graceful-looking women, dressed, both exactly alike, in long, flowing, yellow dominos and black satin masks, and each one carrying a large bunch of drooping mimosa. The taller of the two asked for a cup either of tea or coffee. As she lifted the lace which fell over the lower part of her mask in order to partake of it, she turned towards the place where we were seated. I obtained, thus, a glimpse of her mouth. Not a small mouth by any means, looked at thus, apart from the rest of her face, but a well cut one, with red lips and small regular teeth. This mouth was the only feature I could perceive. Hardly a sufficient proof as to the identity of one who, in other respects, was so completely disguised, still less as to that of a person whom I had never beheld in my life! But, as she lifted up the trimming of her black

mask, I had seen something more than her mouth. I had seen her earrings—two large pear-shaped drops of polished emerald, hanging from tops formed of the same stone, cut into squares, and surrounded by diamonds; earrings that looked as though they might have been the twin offspring of that larger emerald ornament, identical as regarded form and setting, which, through a strange combination of tragic circumstances, had passed, some time ago, into my own possession, the magnificent but detested Crecszoleski family jewel, with its terrible associations, which was lying, hidden away from human sight, in the secret drawer of my dressing-case in this very house.

“Who is that lady?” I gasped, turning to Courtenay Davenant. Something in my manner, I suppose, made him look at me as in anxious astonishment.

But before he could answer me, the yellow

domino had glided up to my side. Instinctively I shrank closer to Courtenay as she approached, conscious to my very finger-tips of the vicinity of something evil and unfriendly. Her companion, in the meantime, had walked to the door of the ball-room, where she stood as though in wrapt contemplation of the dancers. "You would wish to know who I am?" inquired the weird yellow figure before me, speaking in English with a hardly perceptible foreign accent. "Do you suppose that I have come here, wearing this dress, to answer you that question? But I will tell you, instead, who and what you are yourself, for I am acquainted with your family history! You, seated there, *coiffée à la Madonne*, but crowned with the diamonds that are the last gift of your lover, *you*, also, are wearing a mask!"

She then called me by a shameful and

infamous name; coming quite close to me, and hissing the word in my ear, as though she had been a venomous serpent.

Courtenay Davenant started to his feet, and made as though he were about to lay hands on her; but she glided away from him towards where her companion was standing, exclaiming as she went, with a gesture of denunciation,—

“Yes! I unmask you; you who are posing here as an innocent ‘*ingénue*.’ I denounce you, and proclaim what in reality you are—the mistress of the English Ambassador; a position which, let me inform you, was honourably filled by your respectable mother before you!”

I rose from my seat terrified and bewildered. Courtenay’s face was as white as that of a corpse.

“Who is that woman?” he asked—“that creature who has dared to insult you in my

presence? Let me go and tear the mask from her face."

"No, no!" I implored, "I know her! I will go to her alone, and ask her to explain her words. Do not go near her."

"You know her?" he asked in astonishment. "Does she then, really, know anything of your history?"

"Nothing whatever. All she said came from jealousy and malice. She is a very bad woman—cruel and malignant; what can have induced her to come here?"

"Surely you have kept a list of the people who were invited?"

"Yes; and her name was not amongst them. Probably she has taken some other name; I can account, now, for Lord Silchester's unhappy look. He must have known that she was here."

"And you would like to speak to him about her, no doubt?" suggested Courte-

nay, kindly but coldly ; “let me take you to him before this woman has had time to make her escape.”

I told him that this could do no good ; that I would rather, first of all, speak to her alone. He looked at me with an expression of anxiety and bewilderment.

“I can make nothing of all this,” he exclaimed, at length, in a hopeless tone. “Why not let me go and order the creature out of the house, as she was not invited ? Why do you seem afraid that I should speak to her ? What can she say worse—more terrible—than what she has said already ? I pray Heaven that there is no truth in it ! ”

He looked at me earnestly, beseechingly, but I felt too much agitated to reply. I was striving to understand what some of those terrible words could possibly mean. The first part of the malignant speech

hurled at me by Delphine Dobrowolska from under her black mask (for I could not doubt but that the yellow apparition was she), in all ignorance of my relationship to her unfortunate brother, had merely confirmed me in a suspicion which had lain dormant for some months in my mind. I was convinced, now, that Lord Silchester ("George Collingwood," as he was at that time) was the "Englishman in a good position" with whom the Countess had fallen in love—after some strange, tigress fashion—years ago, in Paris. I recalled the scrap of paper—evidently a part of one of her letters—upon which my godfather had written down Hugo's name at Ingleby Grange; the name that, as he had expressed it, "sounded like the crackling of a bag of biscuits." In this letter she had entreated the good offices of her former admirer for her "*cher frère Hugo*;" and hence it had arisen, no doubt,

that George Collingwood had invited the Polish Prince to his father's country-house. Later on she had proposed visiting it herself; but he had declined (as I had good cause to remember) to fall in with her views, pleading, by way of excuse, the precarious state of the old lord's health. It was apparent to me from this, as well as from several words which my godfather had let fall in my presence, that, whatever might have been his relations with Madame Dobrowolska in the past, he had had no desire whatever to renew them in the present. I could conceive nothing more wounding and humiliating to a woman, such as I imagined her to be, than this evident indifference upon the part of the man she had striven so hard to enthrall. One would have fancied that — all things considered — Petersburg would have been the very last place in which she would have ventured to present herself;

but, to a person so reckless and unscrupulous there may have lurked an additional charm in the notion that her sojourn would not be unattended by danger. She had come, I doubted not, as I had come myself, with the intention of visiting Hugo. She had found the man who had seemed to scorn her repeated advances established here as English Ambassador. What more likely than that—taking advantage of the facilities for disguise afforded by this “*bal masqué et costumé*,” she should seek his presence once more—if only to give vent to the bitterness and malice which animated her heart? She had discovered that I, a young woman not related to the Ambassador by any tie of kinship (this she would have had every opportunity of learning through Celestine Vigon, her creature and accomplice), was living here as a member of his household. Mason’s involuntary indiscretion, together

with my costume as "Night," and my emblematical *bouquet*—the very one she had seen displayed in the florist's window, would have enabled her to identify me at once, even supposing that I had not been occupying the prominent position of hostess. Celestine Vigon was at her elbow, too, to trace any resemblance that I might still bear to the little child she had once known; for I felt sure that the other yellow figure could be no one else but the Frenchwoman, dressed exactly like her mistress, with the view of increasing our mystification. It was not wonderful, then (I said to myself), that Delphine Dobrowolska—poor Hugo's evil genius, who had once imagined herself to be in love with the Ambassador—should desire now to insult and wound me. Perhaps, as there were so many mischief-makers about, she might even have believed that I deserved the guilty and shameful name

which she had just hissed at me in her impotent rage. But what had my poor mother—that blameless and beautiful angel, invoked by me whenever I had felt most the need of pure and spiritual consolation—to do with all this complication of envy, hatred, and malice? These thoughts, which have taken some time to set down in writing, passed through my mind very quickly, before, indeed, I had reached the ball-room, where the two yellow-clad women were now standing. By-and-by Courtenay Davenant's voice broke in upon my musings.

“Miss Collingwood,” he said, gently, “may I, without seeming impertinent, ask you one question?”

I answered that he might ask me as many as he liked.

“Were those diamonds—the beautiful stars you are wearing in your hair, and which, I hear, only arrived from England

this morning, by the messenger — really given to you by Lord Silchester ? ”

“ He wished to give them to me,” I answered, “ but though he is such a dear old friend, I did not like to accept a present of so much value from him. They are family diamonds, besides ; so I told him I would rather only wear them for this evening.”

“ They are only lent to you, then, to wear with your fancy dress ? ”

“ They are only lent to me,” I repeated.

“ Then let us go together, and tell that black-masked, black-hearted woman, that she lied in her teeth ! ”

“ No, no ! ” I implored—not knowing what slanderous words he might not hear, aimed at the one whose memory had always been so sacred to me.

He looked at me sadly and reproachfully, and then exclaimed vehemently :

“ I wish to Heaven that I could see a

way out of all these mysteries and disguises ! I implore you to be, at least, open with me ; to tell me the truth about yourself and your position. Forgive me if I speak as one having authority. I care for you, Helen ; this is my excuse. I have looked up to you as something pure, and good, and beautiful, so far above me in every way ; the perfect woman I have dreamed of for years ; but if I thought that the horrid thing I have just heard was true I would endeavour never to look upon your face again as long as I lived. It would remind me too painfully of an illusion destroyed, of an awakening from a delightful dream to a most miserable reality ! ”

“ I will tell you everything,” I answered, “ all my unhappy history, — much that will shock and surprise you. I will make no concealments, but it must be to-morrow, not now. I must speak again with that

woman before she leaves the house, and I must see her alone."

"What time may I come to-morrow?" he asked.

He looked pale, haggard, and miserable, almost like one who could have no more joy in life. But for those last mysterious words hissed at me by the tongue of the yellow serpent, I might, perhaps, have derived some manner of consolation from this proof that Courtenay was not, really, the callous, insensible creature I had deemed him. As it was, however, I was absorbed by one idea, a growing dread, a ghastly suspicion, which I hated myself for nourishing, even for a moment. I dreaded that there might lurk, in the Countess's terrible words, some particle of truth, and I was in terror lest she should escape me before I could confront her again. Then my mind became confused with all sorts of desperate projects

by which I hoped to compel her to retract her malignant accusations.

“Tell me what time I may come to you?” Courtenay asked once more, in a voice from which all hope seemed to have departed.

I told him that if he would come to our sitting-room at about three o’clock upon the following afternoon, I would endeavour, if possible, to see him alone, and that I would then tell him my story, without making any concealments.

“Upon the stroke of three,” he answered, “I will be there.”

CHAPTER VIII.

A MOMENT afterwards I was standing opposite to the woman whom I have called the yellow serpent, and she was smiling at me and mocking me underneath the lace frill of her black satin mask. The second serpent was at her side, but I could distinguish between the two in spite of their being dressed alike, and I went straight up to the woman wearing the emerald earrings.

“I do not want you, Celestine Vigon!” I said, thrusting her aside; “I wish to speak to Madame Dobrowolska alone!”

Because of their masks I could not see upon their faces the effect of my words, but they both started simultaneously, and the one I had addressed as "Celestine Vigon" slunk back into the crowd.

I felt reckless, defiant, and utterly without fear. I was inspired, as it seemed to me, with a high and sacred mission. My dead mother's honour was at stake, and I was prepared to dare everything in order to vindicate it. I exerted all my "volitional power," to use Hugo's favourite term, to combat and counteract this other will, formidable though I knew it to be, which was at work now within only a few inches of me, shrouded in the long folds of the ghastly yellow domino. I half feared that when I began to speak my emotion—my intense exaltation—might prevent my words from being audible. I strove, however, by a desperate effort, to school my voice so that

it should not tremble, and said as calmly as I could,

“Madame Dobrowolska, I desire to speak to you with reference to the language which you used just now about my mother. I pass over your insults to myself, the result, no doubt, of your ignorance of true facts. What you said of *her*, however, was a malicious lie!”

As I paused, overcome by emotion, I heard her laughing softly underneath her mask.

“Ah! this is real melodrama!” she sneered. “You can make a fortune upon the stage, mademoiselle, when all other speculations fail! What fire! What energy! What virtuous English indignation! And by what new name do you address me, too, for some dramatic purpose! ‘Dobrowolska?’ Who is Madame Dobrowolska? Well! I am sorry to be obliged by you to repeat my

unpleasant home-truths! George Collingwood, our noble host of to-night, was your mother's favoured lover once, as I am assured that he is your's at the present time!"

"It is a lie!" I gasped. "A wicked, malicious lie!"

The room seemed to be reeling and swaying before my eyes; but I was striving hard to be calm. I knew that any show of emotion upon my part, unmasked as I was, must attract attention.

"If you will not believe my words I can produce for you other proofs," the yellow demon said softly. "I have them here in this room for your inspection. Would you like to look at them?"

"Yes," I answered, sternly, my tongue cleaving to the roof of my mouth, and my heart beating so fast that I could scarcely breathe. I tried to say more but found that

I had completely lost my voice. By-and-by, I managed to get out the words,

“Show me your proofs then.”

She flitted across the room to where her accomplice was standing, and I saw the two women whispering together.

Miss Warden who, arrayed as a duenna, had been watching me in astonishment, now came to me for an explanation of my strange conduct. I had only time to tell her that I had discovered that the Prince's sister was here—that she had insulted me—but that I could hold my own, and desired now to settle a private matter with her. I begged Miss Warden not to interrupt me, therefore, but to remain where I could see her, and beckon to her, in case I required her. I told her that I intended going with Madame Dobrowolska into one of the small rooms opening upon the corridor in order that we might not be remarked.

“But you are as white as a sheet, Helen,” she said. “Any one would see that something is agitating you. I shall go and fetch one of those spare dominos from the cloak-room and you can then put it on and be hidden from observation.”

She went off to act upon this excellent suggestion, and in another instant the Countess was again at my side. She was holding a small packet in her hand.

“Are you acquainted with the writing of your mother, Lady Davenant?” she inquired in a voice of mock courtesy. “I have here three letters written by her to our noble and respectable host in the days when he was neither so noble nor so respectable. Would you like to look at them?”

By this time I had become a good deal calmer.

“Yes, I will look at them,” I answered; “but not here. Be good enough to come

with me into one of the empty rooms in the passage. Your letters are probably forgeries."

I spoke defiantly, but my heart was filled with misgivings. I felt that I might be about to experience some form of bitter disillusion.

"Come then," said the Countess, imperiously, and we quitted the ball-room together.

In the passage I met Miss Warden with the domino. I slipped it on in the first empty room we came to, and tied the black, bat-like mask over my face.

"Now we are upon equal terms!" I said, as I motioned my companion to a chair, and sat down opposite to her.

"Upon equal terms!" she repeated, laughing scornfully. "Ah, girl, you know little of the one you are braving if you venture to speak thus! Were I to exert

my will at this moment, which this evening is stronger than it has ever been before, I could compel you to kneel down now upon the *parquet* and grovel at my feet! But to what purpose? It would be only waste of time!"

She thrust out one of her feet as she spoke, a very small foot for so tall a woman, shod with a pointed yellow slipper, to match the colour of her domino.

"You are right!" I exclaimed, forcing a scornful laugh too. "It would be only waste of time! I know all about your 'will,' your 'volitional power,' your magnetic influence over weak and helpless natures, but I do not fear you! I, too, am possessed of will, of magnetism. If I cannot dominate you, at least I can resist and defy you!"

Now that my face was covered I was enabled thus to assume a tone of bravado.

As I have already said, I felt no fear of this woman or of her pretended powers, and I knew that, in the presence of hard and merciless natures, no sign of nervousness or apprehension has ever stood anybody in good stead. It is only those who are sensitive and emotional themselves that can make allowance for the falterings and misgivings of others.

I was unable, of course, to perceive the effect of my words. She did not reply to them, but only said quietly :

“Well, here are the letters. You can look at them one at a time. It will be best to read them according to the dates. You will observe that, although the addresses are perfectly distinct, and also in Lady Davenant’s writing, the letters have never passed through the post. This is the only mysterious part of it; she must have for-

gotten to send them. The rest is all quite plain."

With this she handed me the first letter, which I took mechanically, my heart swelling with conflicting emotions.

It was enclosed in a small, slender envelope, such as were generally used some years ago, with one of the old-fashioned red postage-stamps in the corner. It was sealed with a little red seal, which, however, had been broken in the opening.

I examined the envelope and its direction with the greatest attention, holding it close up to the little oblique eyes of my black mask :—

" *To the Honourable George Collingwood,*" and then followed the name of his father's place, and of our nearest post-town.

Alas, there could be no doubt whatever as to the handwriting ! It was the writing

upon which I had taken such pains to form my own, resembling, too, in every respect, that of the letter which had been numbered for so long amongst my dearest treasures,—the letter which my mother had written to Mason, then my nurse, when I was quite a baby !

Now that I was indeed sure that the writing was my mother's, I felt that it would be little short of sacrilege were I to read the words which had never been intended for prying eyes. The woman at my side had read them, it was true ; through some combination of treachery and cunning the letters had fallen into her cruel hands ; but my poor dead mother, could she have been consulted, would surely have preferred that any rash words which she might once have written should be read by her bitterest enemy rather than by the child she had so dearly loved.

As I held the letter thus in my hand an inspiration came to me. It was almost as though a voice, the voice of that one who had been lost to me for so long, was whispering imploringly in my ear :

“ The letters are for George Collingwood. He has never yet received them. They should be read by no other eyes ! ”

Then the woman at my side spoke too ; she was becoming impatient.

“ Remember,” she said, “ the letter is not yours. You are to return it to me. I hold the others till you give me back this one, and it is the last of the three that is the worst ! ”

“ I shall not read them ! ” was all that I could find the voice to answer. I was thinking profoundly. I had decided that I must obtain possession of these letters at all hazards. How was I to attain this end ?

By-and-by an idea occurred to me. Outside in the passage I caught sight of two figures—the “duenna” and the other yellow domino. Our respective accomplices (if I may apply this equivocal term to so old and estimable a friend as Miss Warden) were hovering about close to the doorway, like two “seconds,” anxiously watching lest their “principals” should transgress any of the established rules of single combat.

I beckoned to the duenna, and she came at once to my side. I whispered my instructions, and she left me to carry them out. I had desired her to fetch me something from my bed-room, which, fortunatley was upon this same floor, shut-off, with our sitting-room, from the passage, by a small vestibule, the door of which we had locked, seeing that there were so many strangers about. She knew, however, where to find the key.

“You are wishing to revenge yourself upon me in some way?” asked the yellow domino scoffingly. “You are sending for George Collingwood, for your lover, to warn him who is amongst his guests? I can assure you that you are merely losing your time! You do not know me, though you pretend to do so! *He*, on the contrary, has seen and recognised me. We have had some agreeable conversation together about past times!”

I took no heed of what she was saying. I was developing my plan of action, praying and hoping for the firmness and courage necessary to carry it out, and for victory, in the end, over my merciless adversary.

I had no doubt, now, but that these were the three letters abstracted by Celestine Vigon during my mother's lifetime, and about which she had afterwards written to Sir Harry, demanding fifty pounds as the price of their restitution. Sir Harry had

evidently dismissed this attempt at extortion with contempt, and I could but feel thankful now to think that the letters had never fallen into his hands. Still, they should remain no longer in the possession of these two unscrupulous women. Somehow, I must obtain them at once, and I had just thought of a method by which I hoped to succeed in doing this.

“Had you not better begin to read?” said the Countess impatiently. “Soon I shall have to go. It is later than I had meant to stay. Read the last one, in which she calls him her ‘own George.’ ‘I will share you’ (she goes on) ‘with no one! I must be the first in your existence, and all joy in life would end for me should I lose you. With *you*, I fear it is different. I often picture you to myself smiling and happy, even dancing at a ball, perhaps, when I am dead and gone from

you for ever!’ You see that Lady Davenant (that respectable British matron!) was at times quite prophetic! After reading you will not say that the letters are forgeries!”

I was almost glad that she had mentioned the word “forgeries.” The envelopes were certainly addressed by my mother’s hand, but how could I tell, without looking, whether their contents were genuine? I took the letter I held out of its cover, and, without unfolding it, examined the writing of the few words thus presented to my view. The writing was the same as that upon the outside of the envelope. I returned it to the Countess, since she would not give them all to me at once, and examined the two others in the same way. There was no doubt as to the authenticity of the writing, though, from the little I saw of it, I could not have known whether the letters were compro-

mising ones or not. In the last, I caught sight of the printed address "Northover Park" upon the writing-paper.

Madame Dobrowolska seemed mortified because I had not read more. She had repossessed herself of them, and was shuffling them up and down in her hands as though they had been playing-cards.

Miss Warden came up to me at this moment, and slipped a small packet into my hand. I hoped that I now held in my grasp something that my adversary would wish for as eagerly as I wished for the letters, and that, if I could only retain my coolness and presence of mind, I might effect an exchange. Miss Warden retired to the passage. We were alone together once more. I assumed, beneath my mask, a manner of complete indifference.

"I do not see why we should be made responsible for the failings of our relations,"

I said quietly. "Somebody has said, somewhere, that we cannot reform our forefathers. Besides which, it is not always the guiltiest person who is discovered and unmasked! *You* must know this, Madame Dobrowolska, you, who are free to come here to-night, whilst your unfortunate brother is deprived of his liberty for life! Whose are the hands that are really stained with blood?"

I had commenced speaking in a careless voice, but I had increased in vehemence as I proceeded. I felt that I uttered these last words in quite a denunciatory tone. My cheeks were burning as though with fever, and my heart was beating violently. I felt valiant, indignant, inspired—every nerve and fibre of my being was concentrated for the achievement of my object. The yellow figure in front of me seemed to have turned suddenly into stone. She neither spoke nor moved, but sat perfectly

quiet, looking at me, I suppose, through the little eyes of her mask.

Now that I was fairly roused, words came to me easily enough. My difficulty was, indeed, to prevent them from coming too fast.

“Pitiless, merciless woman!” I exclaimed; “you came here to-night only to taunt and humiliate me—to give pain and suffering to one who has never injured you! You have endeavoured to cast a slur upon the name of my mother, who, if you ever regarded her as a rival, is dead now, and removed for ever from your path. A generous woman would have left her memory in peace. But you have neither generosity nor mercy. You have never possessed a ray of human pity. Had you any for your second husband—the rich Jew, whom you married out of pique and self-interest—when you stood over him in that gloomy subterranean vault where he

was done to death? Who was it who tore from his neck the talisman which you fancied might have protected him from his murderers? When your brother's hand faltered, who was it who encouraged him to achieve the horrid deed? Helpless under your malign influence, like a puppet in your cruel hands—poor Hugo, your victim also, the man upon whose superstition and susceptibility you have ever wrought with such fatal effect, struck as one might strike in a dream, incited by you—by your imaginary grievances against your husband! Where is he now—this brother whom you pretended to love; whose affection, whose fortune, you have used for your own selfish purposes? Have you had mercy upon him—upon anybody? Why, then, should I spare your feelings now, I who know all the particulars of your many crimes? Here! look at what I hold in my

hand! Of what ghastly horrors would this not tell if it could find voice to speak! Examine it well, Delphine Crecszoleska—Countess Dobrowolska—Madame Bernard!—I hardly know by which of your many ‘aliases’ I ought to address you! Does not this ornament bring back to your memory the face of the dead man whose body you helped to bury in those secret vaults, in order, as you thought, the better to conceal all traces of your crime? Look! it matches the earrings you are wearing at this very moment!” and I held towards her the large emerald and diamond pendant—the Crecszoleski family jewel, of which I had become possessed through so strange and sinister a combination of events.

She snatched at it convulsively, but I retained my hold. I noticed that her fingers trembled.

“Give it to me! You must have stolen

it! It was the gift of my mother! I will have possession of my own property!" she gasped, all in a breath.

"No, no!" I rejoined quietly, tightening my hold upon the hated thing; "there is no question of stealing! This is mine now, but it shall be yours upon certain conditions. I will give it up to you for those three letters."

As far as I could judge by the voice in which she replied, my words had come as a relief to her.

"Do not think that I am in fear of you, girl," she said, apologetically, "because my hands are trembling with emotion! But my mother's favourite ornament, the marriage-gift of my father—the object I valued more than any other I possessed! It is the unexpected sight of this that has overcome me!"

Another moment, and I had achieved my

purpose. The three letters were safe in my possession, and I had handed over the emerald pendant to its former owner. She laughed softly as her fingers closed upon it.

“Ah! now I am once more myself!” she exclaimed. “You were not aware, probably—you who have been speaking just now of talismans, that this jewel is one. That is why I would not have lost it for the world! It was only because you were holding it, that you were able for a moment to exert your will against mine! Poor little fool! You imagined that you were intimidating me!”

“I am myself again, also,” I answered, with assumed calmness. “I care nothing at all about your will—your powers of dominion; all I must advise you is, to go and exercise them elsewhere! Leave this house now, which decency, discretion, good taste, should have forbidden you to enter,

and take with you that other wicked woman—Celestine Vigon, your servant and accomplice, the woman you employed to act as a spy in my mother's house, and who, I have good reason to suspect, at your cruel instigation, had some hand in her death ! ”

I rose from my chair as I finished speaking, and went out into the passage where Miss Warden and Celestine Vigon were standing.

“ You had better leave this house, at once, Celestine,” I said, going straight up to the masked figure. “ Neither you nor Madame Dobrowolska ought ever to have entered it. Persuade her, now, to go quietly away before she is recognised. It is known to more than one person that she is here, and she may be arrested at any moment.”

Without replying, she glided past me, and rejoined her mistress in the room I had just quitted.

I now begged Miss Warden to make my excuses to the Ambassador if he should inquire after me, and to say that fatigue had obliged me to retire before the end of the ball; and with the three letters tightly grasped in my hand, I sought the solitude of my own chamber, feeling, now that my excitement had somewhat subsided, utterly broken down and exhausted both in mind and in body.

I have often wondered since, how it happened that I was enabled to say and do what I did, by what unseen force I was supported and inspired to act a part which was so foreign to my nature. I cannot bring myself to believe, of course, that the emerald pendant was really a talisman. Upon suddenly beholding it in my hand Madame Dobrowolska had, for an instant, lost her presence of mind. By this I had profited, and anxious that I should not attri-

bute her emotion to fear, it had occurred to her, no doubt, to invest the family jewel with supernatural powers.

Without attaching any importance to her words, however, I must admit that, whilst holding the pendant in my hand, I was confirmed and strengthened in my previous abhorrence of this woman and her crimes. The sight of it brought back to me with painful force the impressions of misery and horror with which I had listened at Nice to the terrible revelations of Mrs. Marks; and the ghastly scenes which had been enacted in the vaults of the Polish *château* presented themselves so vividly to my imagination that I felt impelled to refer to them and to assume a tone of vehement denunciation.

It was nearly three o'clock by my watch when I entered my bedroom. I took off my dress, my veil, my crown of glittering

stars. The morning was here ; I had done with night and her emblems ! My *bouquet* was drooping and faded. I put it in water for conscience' sake, although I knew that as the violets were mounted upon wire they would never revive. I felt as limp, as lifeless, as hopeless of revival, as those withering flowers, but in spite of my fatigue I decided that it would be a mockery to go to bed. I knew that after the disturbing events of the evening it would not be possible to sleep, and I resolved, whilst awaiting the daylight, to think over all that had occurred, and consider my plans for the future.

CHAPTER IX.

As I sat musing in my solitude I dared not read the letters which were lying under my hand, fearing lest they might go towards proving the truth of Madame Dobrowolska's malignant assertions. I set myself, however, to recall the events which had followed upon my mother's death. Alas, every circumstance appeared calculated to confirm my newly aroused suspicions !

I remembered, as though it had been but yesterday, the afternoon of her death, and how,—ignorant of the news that awaited them,—my father, the hale and hearty Sir

Harry Davenant of those days, and George Collingwood, his friend and neighbour, had ridden back from the hunting-field together like two brothers, so close and cordial had seemed their good fellowship.

I remembered, too, the sense of mystery and misfortune which had oppressed my infant mind, the awed consciousness that something altogether unusual and important was taking place, whilst I had waited frightened and wondering, in the passage within sight of my mother's bedroom door. Then I had heard my father's voice, sounding hoarse and unfamiliar, as though half-choked with emotion ;

“Leave me alone with her, George” (how well I remembered his words !) “I feel that I can bear it now !” and George Collingwood, the highly-placed diplomatist of to-day, had staggered out into the passage, looking dazed and miserable. Why

had he caught me up in his arms as he came upon me standing there, and kissed me so tenderly and despairingly, and why were my cheeks afterwards all wet with his tears? Because,—everything seemed quite plain to me now,—he had loved the woman who had just passed away, the wife of the friend who trusted and believed in him, and because I was her child, the only part of her that now remained to him upon earth!

My father and George Collingwood had ridden home together from hunting on that fatal day, as I have already said, and, to judge by appearances, they were then upon terms of the most cordial friendship. Together they had walked up the steps leading to the front door, and they had gone together, as though from a desire for mutual sympathy and support, into the very chamber of death. But had they ever met again after that day? My father had

quitted Northover almost immediately, it is true, and George Collingwood's diplomatic career had necessitated his living a great deal abroad. Still, there must have been occasions when these two men, seeming once such close friends and comrades, must have found themselves again within only a few miles of one another; what more natural than that they should have foregathered and talked together over old times?

And yet I could not remember that George Collingwood had ever set foot in Northover House since my poor mother's death. Nay, as I went on reviving my earliest recollections thus, it even seemed to me that he must have been bound by some vow or promise to abstain from doing so. Two or three circumstances, mere trifles in themselves, occurred suddenly to my remembrance.

When, after my childish days were over and done with, and Miss Warden and I were leading a monotonous, though by no means an unhappy existence, at my old home, why had not my parents' former friend ever paid me a visit upon some of the many occasions when he was staying with his father in our immediate neighbourhood? This omission was, evidently, neither the result of forgetfulness nor indifference, for when I had fallen in with him that day, when riding upon the high road, his eyes had brightened with pleasure at sight of me, and he had at once made arrangements with me for a second meeting. Why, however, did he not call openly for me at the house and take me for a ride? and why, upon both of these two occasions, had he separated from me, as though with regret, at the lodge-gate of Northover Park, when, by accompanying me all the way to

my home, he might have prolonged our ride and returned to his own by a much shorter and prettier way ?

Then I remembered how, upon the occasion of Hugo Crecszoleski's first visit to us, whilst anxious apparently that the Prince should not see me *en tête-à-tête*, my godfather had not accompanied his guest, explaining, in his letter to Miss Warden, that he had an appointment at the Foreign Office which would oblige him to go to London. As it turned out, however, this must have been merely an excuse. He had walked with the Prince, in order to show him the way, as far as the entrance to Northover Park. Why had he not accompanied him to the house ?

We had fancied at the time that, having from some cause put off his journey to town, he had felt bound, all the same, to adhere to what he had written, but in the

light of all the later knowledge that had come to me, I perceived that he would never have treated us with so much formality, and I was enabled to put quite a different construction upon his conduct. Then I recalled my father's strange behaviour; the extraordinary change which had taken place in him; his apparent horror of everything that could remind him of his dead wife, and his coldness and want of affection towards her child. All this, I fancied, could be very easily explained now. Deceived by the woman he had so tenderly loved, dishonoured by the friend he had so thoroughly trusted, his nature had become soured and embittered. Habits of intemperance, resorted to at first with the view of deadening his misery, had gradually grown upon him.

A drunkard is, no doubt, very like a madman at times, but madness—a dire and

unsought calamity descending upon us by the visitation of God—was far more calculated to inspire sympathy and compassion than its degraded prototype; and so it had been whispered abroad, chiefly by loyal friends and attached servants, that Sir Harry Davenant had become insane.

After his paralytic stroke, my father's mind had, doubtless, become somewhat affected, but, previous to this, there had been, at any rate, a good deal of method in his madness.

His erring wife had not been permitted to repose within the gloomy precincts of the family vault, but lay sleeping in her nameless grave amongst the humble grass-grown mounds of the simple villagers. How much I should have preferred to rest there,

“Beneath flowers’ roots and birds’ light feet,”

Still, I realised now, that my poor mother's banishment from our grim ancestral charnel-house must have been intended by Sir Harry as a punishment.

Then, too, he had either destroyed every one of his wife's portraits, or hidden them away in lumber-rooms, and he had evidently taken a dislike to me for the very reason which had made George Collingwood love me—because I was *her* child. No doubt he would have hidden me away, too, in a lumber-room, if he had dared. As it was, he had managed to see as little of me as possible!

All this had seemed to me to be very hard to bear at the time. Now, however, I understood, or fancied that I understood, how it was all brought about, and my sympathies were at first entirely upon the side of "poor Sir Harry," as the neighbours round about Northover used pityingly to

call him. I found myself taking, indeed, quite the severe moralists' view of my dead mother's weakness. Then suddenly I veered round again, remembering the gentle and beautiful face of the one who was now for ever silent and unable to defend herself. Looking into my own erring heart, I recognised that *I*, of all women, ought to view with charity the weaknesses of others, and I fell to wondering whether, supposing that I had found myself settled down for life at a dull country-place, with some sort of husband, no matter how worthy and excellent so long as he was not the one man in the world for me, and supposing that Courtenay Davenant had been from time to time my near neighbour, my frequent companion, and always, always—whenever we were thrown together—eager and persistent in his endeavours to win my love, I might not, one day, have been taken at a disad-

vantage and vanquished, as I feared now that my poor mother must have been overcome and vanquished by George Collingwood?

Did she care for him, I wondered, as much as I could care for Courtenay, but for the anxious watch that I was trying to keep over my heart? Her letters to him were upon the dressing-table beside me, within reach of my hand. How easily I could become enlightened upon this subject! But no! I would not commit so cowardly, so base an act; one, too, which could only be productive of further misery to myself! The letters should be given to George Collingwood, the man for whom they were intended, and he should destroy them, after he had read them, so that there would be no danger of their falling, a second time, into evil hands!

For a child to set to work thus to excuse

an erring parent seems, somehow, like a distortion of the proper order in nature; nevertheless, I felt somewhat more composed when I fancied that I had fairly taken into consideration all the temptations with which my mother might have found herself environed.

For George Collingwood, my “noble host,” as Delphine Dobrowolska had sneeringly called him, I could make none of the excuses that I had been making for my mother. He may have tenderly loved her, but where was the merit in this? It could not have been so very difficult to love her! Why, however, if this was the case, had he not married her? She had lived close by, with her father, at Croft’s Farm. Surely he must have been acquainted with her before she was married to Sir Harry? Whether or no, once she was united to another man, his own neighbour and friend,

why did he not leave her to enjoy what, but for him, might have proved a happy and peaceful existence? Alas, why do not people always behave as they should, in this strange world of change and temptation! In spite of my affection for Lord Silchester, I had never regarded him in an ideal light. He was agreeable, clever, possessed of wit, amiability, and a capability for enjoyment, which was at times infectious, but he was no hero. Hugo's words concerning him recurred to my memory, and I was conscious that there was probably a good deal of truth in them.

“George is pre-eminently a materialist,” the Prince had said; “a sensualist,” I had almost added. He has no sympathy whatever with the spiritual aspects of life. ‘Let us eat, drink, and be merry; everything else is nothing!’ expresses his creed to the letter. The best of everything must

always be for himself,—nobody else must be allowed to approach it until it has ceased to please him ; then it may go, and anybody else may take it who likes !” . . . Certain it was that Lord Silchester was essentially a man of pleasure, a Sybarite, seeking and courting the pleasant impressions in life, and somewhat intolerant of all emotion, however nobly inspired, which tended to disturb his equanimity. He was thoroughly practical, too, either by nature or habit ; “the spiritual aspects of life ” had no attractions for him. He would have been the last man in the world to sacrifice the enjoyment of the moment, or to mourn over the inevitable. Yes ; Hugo had probably been correct in his estimate of my godfather’s shallow nature ! And yet, and yet,—might there not be another side to it which had escaped the Prince’s observation, and might not this very lightness and flippancy of mood, like

the froth upon changeful seas, be merely the surface-matter churned from profounder depths ?

I recalled that never-to-be-forgotten evening when, impelled by so many combining forces, I had waited for Hugo in the old summer-house at home, and when, to my surprise and confusion, my godfather had suddenly appeared before me in his stead. The whole scene came back to me so vividly as I sat here, hundreds of miles away, that I could see in imagination the two hares that had been browsing out in the moonlight, scurrying away at the sound of an approaching footstep into the security of the shadowy bracken, and I could smell all the delicious odours of the garden-flowers which had floated upon the air on that English night in August.

There had not been much of the callous Sybarite about George Collingwood then,

and now I felt that I could guess the reason of his emotion ! I could perceive the meaning now of so many things that had seemed to me to be utterly unaccountable then ! Why, for instance, my godfather had been so startled at beholding my letter, when it had fallen upon the floor from the Prince's coat-pocket, and why, at first sight, because of what he had been good enough to term my "peculiar but beautiful handwriting" (so like the handwriting upon the envelopes now before me !) he had "half imagined" that the letter must have been intended for himself. It had reminded him, of course (I thought), of other letters which he had received in the past,—letters written in that "peculiar but beautiful handwriting" which I had taken such pains to imitate, probably upon the very same sort of note-paper, with "Northover Park" embossed upon it in dark blue letters ! And to the old summer-

house, too, my mother's favourite resort, tender and romantic memories were still clinging, no doubt, for him! I recollected how, as he passed out under its rustic porch, he had gathered some of the blossoms from the twining honeysuckle and pressed them to his lips, and how he had said that he would keep them as a remembrance of that "lovely and sacred spot." Yes! I fancied that I could understand all this now! There remained one thing, however, which was still plunged in mystery. Up to the very day of my mother's death, Sir Harry Davenant and George Collingwood had been upon the most friendly terms. My father could have known nothing then of his neighbour's treachery. They were friends still, dear friends, to all appearance, when George Collingwood had caught me up in his arms in the passage. When had the discovery and consequent estrangement taken place?

These three letters could have had nothing to do with it, for I had had positive proof that Sir Harry could never have seen them. Was it not more than probable, however, that there may have been others,—letters which my mother had received from the man she loved, and which she may have, unfortunately, omitted to burn? It is so difficult to a woman to harden her heart sufficiently to burn such letters! “What the hand which has become so dear has written shall be surely sacred to me to all time! Some day, should he leave me for another, or be spirited away to the land of shadows, I might not be able to believe, but for these treasured proofs, that I have ever been so blessed and honoured amongst women!” In some such way as this do we reason, and yet, can one well imagine a more bitter agony than that which must surely follow upon the reading of love-letters from one who is either un-

faithful or dead ? Few women would have the courage, once the evil day had actually dawned, to attempt anything so sad and unprofitable !

But how did my father become possessed of any such letters, supposing that they had existed ? I could not believe that any man, whatever his suspicions may have been (and in this case it was evident that there were none), would have desired, after the death of the woman he had loved, to search about for proofs of her infidelity. What had occurred, too, to open my father's eyes, must have occurred so very quickly, and it was unlikely that, whilst the body of his wife was lying stark upon the bed, he would have sought amongst her private correspondence there, in the very chamber of death ! And yet, before the day appointed for the funeral, he must have discovered something which

rendered her unworthy, in his opinion, of a place in the family vault ?

Suddenly, as I sat musing thus, a terrible suspicion flashed upon my troubled mind. I bethought me of the part I had played upon the memorable day of my mother's death,—of the mysterious directions which she had given me about unlocking the tin-box in her wardrobe, her pale and anxious face whilst I got out the two packets of letters ; her seeming fear lest I should not accomplish her behest before the return of Celestine Vigon with the soup. And then my own sense of consequential importance, as I carefully deposited my uncle Everard's letters, the packet that was bound round with the black silk riband, in the middle of the blazing wood fire ! But was this the packet,—I now asked myself in an agony of sudden apprehension,—which my poor

mother had intended that I should destroy? What could have been the use of burning these letters from her only brother? Why should he have written anything to his sister which it would compromise her to have published, even upon the housetops, after her death? And then what was that other packet, the letters which I could not bring myself to burn because of the pretty red seal which adorned them—the seal bearing upon it the impression of the little horse with wings, “Pegasus,” as I knew now, “the poet’s wingèd steed”? What had my idiotic folly inspired me to do with these letters when my unhappy mother had fainted? I had slipped them just inside the coverlid of her bed, within easy reach of her hand, together with the gold chain from which hung the key of the tin box. Here, no doubt, my father had found them, just after George Collingwood, his trusted

friend, had quitted the room, after my poor mother had breathed her last. And yet, even supposing that he had made this discovery, would he have had the courage, or rather the callousness, to look into the letters at so solemn a moment? Alas! if the letters were indeed compromising ones, it would not have been necessary to read much! The first words probably, of the first letter, would have told him enough! I imagined now that I could perceive precisely how it all happened. He was feeling, perhaps, for her hand—the hand that must have been still warm, hoping maybe to detect some faint pulsation, when his own must have encountered the packet of letters. The circumstance must have struck him as peculiar; he might have fancied that some shock following upon news contained in one of these letters had caused her unexpected death, and so, in an evil moment,

he may have examined them. He would, at once, have recognized the handwriting of his trusted friend. This, coupled with the position in which he had found the letters, may have aroused his suspicions; he may have unfolded one of them and read . . .

“Alas, alas!”—I thought—“miserable, unhappy child! How terribly you were mistaken in supposing that you had rendered your mother a service! Is it not far more probable that your own hand was the means of covering her memory with reproach? Accept then, without repining, the share of suffering and disgrace which has descended, deservedly, upon your head, and console yourself as best you may with the reflection that *she*, at least, has been spared the pain and humiliation with which your folly might have overwhelmed her had she lived! No punishment can be too severe for you, since

nothing can now remedy the consequences of your fatal blunder ! ”

So I went on tormenting myself till the light, stealing through my closed shutters, told me that the day must be already far advanced, and upon unfastening them and looking forth, I saw that all the gilded domes and steeples were glittering in the bright wintry sunshine.

“ *Le secret d’ennuyer,*” says Voltaire, “ *est celui de tout dire ;*” and I fear that I have already more than wearied my readers by this recapitulation of my miserable reflections.

At ten o’clock Mason came to call me, having been told by Miss Warden that I was not to be disturbed until then. Seeing me sitting there in my dressing-gown she fancied at first that I had been up some time ; then, observing that my hair was still dressed and my bed unslept in, she

guessed the truth and began reproaching me.

“You’ll be feeling dreadfully tired, miss, later on,” she said. “It would have been better to have waited and seen off the company than to have sat up here all by yourself!”

Then she added, after a pause—

“We had a fine disturbance after you were gone! One of the ladies, an Italian Countess—so they said—went off into sort of hysterics, or convulsions, and then fainted. They sent after me in the cloak-room, and we untied her mask to give her air, and threw back the kind of hood she wore over her head, and then I saw what I had been nearly sure of at the first moment of setting eyes upon her, that she was the same fine-looking lady I had seen in the afternoon at the flower shop, and by her side was another person dressed just like her,

who I could have taken my oath was '*ma'mselle*,' only she was masked and covered up from top to toe, and I couldn't get to hear her speak. Fancy her impudence, coming to the ball here just as if she was a lady! We passed a damp handkerchief over the face of the lady that fainted. She was certainly a handsome-looking lady enough, but not nearly so young as I thought she was. Her face was a good deal powdered and painted, as we found out by the handkerchief, and her hair looked very nearly white in some places. By-and-by she came to, and hurried on her mask as if she was quite afraid of being seen with her paint off, and they both went away together and got into their carriage before his lordship knew anything about it. And this morning, when the housemaids were looking round, they came upon this in the room she fainted in. It must

have come off when we pulled back her hood."

She opened her apron as she spoke, and I beheld, not without an inward shudder, a thick coil of false hair, black as jet, arranged so as to form a kind of artificial *chignon*.

"I know for certain," Mason went on, "that this is the same hair that the lady was wearing who I met in the flower-shop, only then I fancied that it all grew on her head. I suppose I had better take it down to the porter, although I don't suppose it's very likely that anybody will send to claim such a thing as this!"

To which I replied that I did not suppose so either.

CHAPTER X.

BEFORE half-past two o'clock I had established myself in our sitting-room, and was awaiting, with mingled feelings of impatience and apprehension, the hour of Courtenay's coming.

I had pre-arranged my opening sentence, or rather, my reply to *his* opening sentence, so often, that it had grown quite complicated and difficult to remember. It is foolish, at such moments, to attempt any kind of set task which has to be learnt by rote, for there is a natural eloquence, the outcome of

genuine emotion, which generally ends by putting all our fine phrases to confusion.

I had made up my mind, when I had parted with Courtenay in the ball-room, that to-day I would tell him, in as few words as possible, the history of my life as far as it had gone. I would tell him what, of course, could not fail to surprise him, that I was his cousin Nelly; a wife, and yet not a wife, a widow in almost every sense of the word, and yet unable to make for myself a newer and brighter existence. That I had concealed my identity at first, because of the tragic circumstances which were connected with my husband's name; and that, afterwards, upon hearing of his coming, I had preferred that he should know me as "Miss Collingwood," a stranger—with regard to whom he could have formed neither predispositions nor prejudices—from a foolish feeling of shyness, occasioned by what I

had been told about our "family marriage project," and the objection he had had to the scheme. Then, supposing that he had reproached me with all this, I had intended, woman-like, and in spite of what was in my heart, to have turned the tables upon him at once; to declare that it would have been obvious to anybody possessed of a particle of perception, who I was: that I had said things to him in the sledge which must surely have revealed my identity to any one else; and that, if he had ever taken the trouble to interest himself in his cousin, he would have remembered that, as one of her names was "Collingwood," it was not unlikely that Lord Silchester might be her godfather, and that from the very first I had been introduced as the Ambassador's goddaughter.

Since my stormy scene with Madame Dobrowolska, however, my intentions had

undergone a good deal of modification, and I shrank now from revealing myself until I knew more. I dreaded lest any word of this scandalous story concerning my mother might have reached Courtenay's ears in the past. An idol had crumbled, a star had fallen from my heaven. I was ashamed, now, of the being whose memory I had so venerated and adored. Above all, I was ashamed of having lived, thus, in friendly intercourse, with the man who had brought such dishonour upon our house. Only one hope remained to me, a very faint one. The Ambassador, upon seeing the letters, might be able to throw some new light upon their motive and destination. I would give the letters, one by one, into his hand, and ask him to tell me whether or no they had been written by my mother, and I would watch his face attentively whilst he read, and draw my conclusions from its expression. As

soon as I was dressed, therefore, which was not until nearly twelve o'clock, I wrote him a few formal lines, begging him to see me, if possible, at once, for I did not wish this interview to clash with Courtenay's. Mason, however, by whom I had sent my note, returned in a few minutes to say that His Excellency, contrary to his usual custom, had gone out more than an hour ago, in consequence of a telegram which he had received upon some urgent political matter (his valet thought). He had not yet returned. So now my interview with Courtenay would have to take place before I had seen him, the contrary of what I had hoped to arrange. The three letters were in my pocket, all ready for his inspection, but I knew nothing more with respect to their authenticity, and I felt nervous, confused, vacillating, and utterly undecided as to what I should say to my cousin. I was

looking pale and haggard. It seemed to me as though years must have passed over my head in those last few hours. Sorrow and sleeplessness combined had made me feel bitterly cold. I was sitting cowering by the stove, vainly trying to warm my hands, when the little English travelling clock upon the writing-table struck three. My heart began beating violently.

“Upon the stroke of three,” Courtenay had said to me in the ball-room, “I will be there.”

And, true to his word, before the clock had finished striking, I heard the bell at the entrance to our apartment give a sharp tinkle. An instant afterwards a servant announced “Sir Courtenay Davenant.” I rose to my feet mechanically and awaited his coming. Not for all the wealth of Peru, supposing that would have benefited me, could I have uttered a word. When I

beheld him my whole being became thrilled with a new misery. It flashed upon me that, until now, I had overlooked the bitterest aspect of my situation. What did it signify, in reality, by what name I chose to call myself, whether I was or was not his near kinswoman, and whether my poor mother, in the irrevocable past, had loved, like myself, a man who was not her husband? The misery I was enduring now had nothing to do with all this. It was caused by the consciousness that, apart from anything that might have occurred in the past, I and this man whom I loved must needs go upon our separate ways in the future. Never, whether I called myself "Davenant," or "Collingwood," or "Creszoleska," could he and I meet again upon the same footing as heretofore, once I had told him my story. This meeting, therefore, was but the prelude to an eternal farewell.

I stood facing him for a few seconds, with all this in my heart. Tears came into my eyes, which I could not control. I observed that he, too, looked pale and unhappy. He took my hand, and then—feeling it so cold and listless, I suppose, or else seeing me looking so wretched—it seemed as if he broke down in some resolve which he might have made to treat me with formality, and folding me in his arms he covered my face with kisses. They were altogether despairing kisses, as though of renunciation. No doubt that he, too, had fully realized that this was to be our last meeting. By-and-by he led me gently to a sofa, which was placed at right angles with the stove, and sat down upon it by my side.

It will be necessary for me to say here a few words as to the arrangement of our sitting-room. As is generally the case abroad, once a *suite* of apartments is

entered, several rooms communicated one with another in succession. Of these our sitting-room was the first, shut off from the corridor upon the one hand by a kind of lobby, and separated from the apartments beyond by folding-doors, in front of which, partly to keep off the draught, and partly to dissimulate the fact that the room possessed anything in common with a passage—stood a large black-and-gold screen of Oriental design; and it was in front of this that the sofa upon which we were seated had been placed.

After a few moments of constrained silence, Courtenay spoke.

“ I wish to speak to you to-day,” he said, with the manner of one who is making a supreme effort, “ quite candidly, and without reserve. Heaven knows that I had no thought of doubting you when we first met. You seemed to me a being too pure for the

voice of calumny to assail. You must have known—you must have seen—what my feelings were! Women are so quick at finding out such things! By-and-by, however, suspicions—unworthy suspicions, perhaps—were thrust upon me against my will. Circumstances came to my knowledge by degrees which tortured me and made me wretched. You must let me tell you, Helen, what some of these things were. Loving you as I did, I should not have been human had I not suffered. Let me hear now, from your own lips, that these rumours were false, and I shall be relieved of a miserable burden. You will see that, to me, this is a matter of life or death; and you will forgive me, I trust, if I unwillingly allude to anything that may cause you pain?”

He looked at me earnestly and regretfully, awaiting my answer. But I could find no

words, and so merely nodded my head in assent.

“I understood when I arrived here,” he went on by-and-by—speaking slowly and hesitatingly, as though *he*, too, had been learning his lesson by heart, and was anxious to repeat it in the proper order—“that the Ambassador was your uncle. Several people told me this. I said to myself that you must be a sister of my old friend Tom Collingwood; and such is the effect of the imagination that I even fancied that I observed a likeness—something in your voice and in the way you expressed yourself. Then I remembered that Tom Collingwood had never had a sister, and so I made up my mind that you were probably a cousin; and, having occasion to write to him at about this time, I mentioned you in my letter—you may guess in what terms—assuming that you were his relation.”

“But did I ever tell you that I was his relation?” I put in, eagerly. “You asked me no questions upon this subject until quite lately. Absolve me, at any rate, from having wished to deceive you in this! Last night, when you questioned me, I told you that Lord Silchester was not my uncle—that he was my godfather, and a very dear and kind old friend, but no relation. Why did you not question me sooner?”

“Because, Helen, you seemed to be always so anxious to avoid me. As you know, we had but few opportunities of talking together privately. Whenever I sought to take advantage of any of these you appeared to resent it. If I ever ventured to ask you a question I fancied that you seemed to be embarrassed. God knows how I plotted and planned to drive back with you that night in the sledge!”

“You admit, then, that I tried to prevent

all this misery!" I cried, passionately, "and that it was *you* who strove to bring it about? Did I not tell you, as we drove home that night, that I was bound and tied?"

"You did," he answered, turning very pale; "must we, then, go on being miserable still?"

"Do you mean—has nothing changed since that evening?"

"Yes."

"Are you still 'bound and tied,' as you were then?"

"Nothing has changed since that evening," I answered sadly.

"But then, Helen, you told me that you were bound by duty, not by affection. This made me hope on. I loved you so much that I was prepared to endure almost anything for your sake. Then came these horrible stories, chapter and verse given,

statements which I was utterly powerless to disprove; and which, sometimes, everything seemed to confirm. Tom Collingwood, too, wrote to say that he had never had a female cousin of his own name; and he asked me—meaning, of course, no harm—to find out whether some of the family diamonds, which his uncle had sent for from his banker's, were for the young lady who was being passed off as Miss Collingwood? I got this letter last Saturday evening; on Sunday morning the diamonds arrived by the messenger; and, last night, I saw you wearing them at the ball. Beautiful as they looked in your beautiful hair—the sight of them, after what I had heard, nearly drove me mad. I should have liked to have torn them off your head, and stamped them under foot. Then I thought it would be wiser to tear your image out of my heart instead.”

“You seem to have very readily believed evil of me,” I said, as proudly and reproachfully as I could; “a few gossiping stories, invented by jealous, mischief-making people, come to your ears, and at once you condemn me unheard—the woman you profess to love!”

“Indeed, no!” he exclaimed, earnestly, as he took one of my hands in both his own; “indeed, indeed, I came here hoping that you would tell me with your own lips that these stories were calumnies and inventions! Make me believe in you, again, Helen; ease my heart of all these miserable suspicions and I shall bless you as long as I live! If I venture to question you now, if I wound you by my seeming doubts, forgive me, I implore you! I have but one object: to refute these infamous rumours, and to set at rest for ever the suspicions they have given rise to. Answer

me, then, Helen ; and, for God's sake, tell me the truth : Were you ever at a place in Piedmont, an old monastery, called St. Dalmas de Tende ? ”

“ Yes,” I answered, faintly ; determined that I would make no more concealments ; “ I was there in the autumn of last year.”

“ And whilst you were there—forgive me for asking you this ; afterwards, I will explain why I am compelled to do so—did you call yourself ‘ Miss Collingwood,’ as now, or by another name, which was not your own, the name of a married woman ? ”

“ Yes ; I called myself by the name of a married woman.”

His countenance fell as I finished speaking. The haggard look returned to it, and the expression of hope died out of his eyes. He let go of my hand, and, after a pause, resumed, in a changed voice :

“ And you had a reason—a sad, an un-

fortunate reason—for thus passing as a married woman ; and Lord Silchester was with you at this time ? ”

“ Yes ; I had a reason, and Lord Silchester was with me. He consoled and supported me through that miserable time.”

“ But the people of the place—the proprietor and the servants—were not aware that Lord Silchester was staying there ? He had reasons, as well as yourself, for wishing to conceal his name ? ”

“ Yes ; he had reasons,” was all that I could summon voice to reply.

Courtenay was speaking now—I fancied—quite sternly and bitterly, as a man devoid of either love or compassion might speak to some poor erring wretch, for whose sorrow and humiliation he could spare no grain of sympathy. His manner seemed to freeze the life-blood in my veins.

“ He is a fair-weather friend,” I thought,

bitterly; "whilst he saw me flattered and admired, he imagined that he was in love with me. Now, when he thinks that I am only some unfortunate girl who has been betrayed and disgraced in the past, he can cast me at once from his heart, without a pang. He suspects, now, that I am utterly unworthy of his love; and, with this, his love changes immediately into contempt. What an easy transition! How many might well envy him his philosophy!"

Then to these bitter reflections succeeded sadder, tenderer memories. From this frost-bound northern city, I was transported, in fancy, to that peaceful Italian valley at the foot of the *Col de Tende*. There, in the cleft of the blue hills, rose the white belfry of the old convent. I saw the tall, waving meadow-grass by the river, bright with butterflies and fragrant with flowers. Then the scene changed, and I seemed to be lying

nigh unto death in my bedroom—the room which had once been a chapel, with its high, vaulted roof, the room in which little George had been born; and I saw the old *padre* of Briga passing to and fro between the bed and the three tall lancet windows in his rusty *soutane*. I thought, as the tears came into my eyes, that if only my child had lived I should never have found myself in this humiliating position: seeming altogether at the mercy of this man, who had come to cross-question me, as though I had been an arraigned criminal. I should have had an interest, an object in life—something to satisfy the hunger and longing of my heart—which would effectually have protected me from all the more dangerous and disturbing forms of affection. I saw, in imagination, the cold, placid little face—the lids fast closed over the eyes that had never opened upon the new world that he

had left so soon. And then, all in the space of a second, I had wandered away to the peaceful graveyard upon the green hill-side, and stood once more by the little mound with its cross of wooden fretwork. My garland was hanging there still, the flowers as fresh as upon the day when I had gathered them. To the left nestled the little brown village of Briga—the home of honest, simple-hearted peasant-folk, who knew nothing of the passions and ambitions which agitate stormier lives. Now and again the bells of the wandering flocks tinkled upon my ear; whilst, far away, rose those elfin tents—the peaks of the high snow mountains—one above another; dimpled upon one side by soft shadows, and flushed upon the other with the pink glow of the sunset.

What a calm, tranquil, beautiful scene!
A haven of rest—of oblivion—for a troubled

storm-tossed spirit ! I covered my face with my hands, and burst into tears at the remembrance of it.

“ Oh ! that I could be at peace,” I cried, “ amongst those quiet mountains, by the side of my poor little George ! ”

The words escaped me involuntarily ; almost as though my thoughts had taken voice.

“ George was the name of your child ? ” Courtenay asked by-and-by ; “ called, I presume, after Lord Silchester ? ”

“ Yes ; called after Lord Silchester,” I answered wearily, drying my eyes and striving to stifle my emotion.

I know now what I did not know then,—that all this time, whilst I fancied that Courtenay was experiencing for me nothing warmer than contempt, his heart was going out to me in reality, in compassion, in tenderness, and in love. If he had known me

at first only as some poor, repentant Magdalen, and grown to care for me in spite of my unfortunate past, he might, perhaps, have shown me more of what was passing in his heart. But he had chosen to set me upon so exalted a pinnacle. Compared to all other women, I seemed—as he has told me since, even what those far snow-mountains were to the lower hills; and an illusion of this kind, thus suddenly destroyed, coming to him with the sharp pang of a severed nerve, paralysed him for the moment through the sheer force of its agony.

Then, when he could think at all, he fell to wondering (it seems) why he could not hate me after all he had heard; why, on the contrary, his love seemed only to have grown stronger and more desperate. He knew,—seeing that he had always admired most that which is most admirable in woman,—that this could not be because,

as he then imagined, I was altogether fallen and unworthy; but because, through a combination of shame, of bitterness, of jealous misery, he was enabled to realize how great a part I had previously had in his life, and how precious even this shattered idol must ever be to his heart. And so, in pity, in love, in desperation, with no kind of set purpose or hope for the future, but only for the momentary solace, he would have clasped me again in his arms, only that I, knowing nothing of all this, and thinking that he meant merely to treat a light woman lightly, thrust him resolutely from me, as one might thrust something that was personally repellent, and, rising to my feet, I went towards the door, in order to make my escape to my bed-room.

But, before I could reach it, a servant presented himself, and informed me that His Excellency had only just received my

letter. He had been absent all the morning, but could see me now if it was convenient to me to receive him. "I will receive him at once," I said, desperately, feeling that some change, were it only in the nature of my sufferings, would be a kind of relief.

The footman [departed to deliver this message, and I went back to the sofa, near to which Courtenay was standing, looking pale, miserable, and angry. A mistaken sense of jealousy, I suppose, caused him to mutter a few mad words of reproach and renunciation. Then he said, almost fiercely,

"Let me get out of this room before he comes to you! You cannot wish me to make a third at such an interview! I cannot meet him after what I have just heard. Good-bye!" He was pushing past me towards the door, but I stopped him.

"No, no!" I exclaimed, with the determination begotten of despair; "you

must not go yet! You *shall* make a third party at this interview — I desire it—and you owe me this reparation after all the unworthy suspicions you have nourished against me! I have told you nothing that could have prejudiced you against one of the kindest of my friends had not your mind been filled with foregone conclusions which have made you misinterpret and distort everything you have heard. Now, however, you can hear the truth; you will learn, a tany rate, how you have misjudged the unhappy woman whom you professed to love.”

I folded back a flap of the large black screen as I spoke, and disclosed a dark nook, bounded by the double doors, which seemed made on purpose for eaves-droppers.

“No, no!” he whispered breathlessly, but I was determined.

“Come, I implore you, I beg of you!”

I pleaded, meeting his eyes boldly for the first time. "Do me this favour, the only one I shall ask of you,—for the sake of the love you say you have borne me. Hear now, with your own ears, what may console you, perhaps, if you really care for me! quick! hide yourself! the Ambassador is coming!" and I thrust him, very much against his will, behind the great black screen. I had scarcely done so when Lord Silchester entered the apartment.

CHAPTER XI.

SEEING me in such a terrible state of agitation, my whole frame trembling, and my eyes still wet with weeping, Lord Silchester was naturally alarmed.

“Dearest Helen, what can have happened?” he asked, anxiously, taking my two hands in his own. “You have not heard any bad news?” And he drew me, as Courtenay had done, to the sofa.

“Don’t shrink away from me, dear, as if I were an enemy!” he went on, by-and-by, although I was quite unconscious of any such shrinking, “but tell me what made

you write me such a cold, stiff, little letter this morning? How have I managed to get myself into such sudden disgrace?" I felt embarrassed as to how to reply. I had written, it is true, much more formally than usual, for I was smarting at the moment under the painful emotions evoked by what I regarded as the discovery of his treachery. I had sent for him with a particular object. The letters with which I intended to confront him were all ready for him to examine, and yet, now that I came to think of it, how could I possibly question him upon this subject whilst Courtenay Davenant was listening from behind the screen?

I had insisted upon his making an unwilling third at this interview, because I saw that he was determined to put a wrong construction upon it, and because I wished him to hear with his own ears what would surely absolve me in his eyes from all sus-

picion. But might not the words which he was about to hear, whilst exonerating me, shed shame and dishonour upon another? I remained staring absently at the Ambassador, not knowing what to do or to say. As I gazed into his face I perceived that it looked worn and anxious, as it had looked upon the previous night when I had come upon him in the corridor in company with the Russian officers.

Before I could inquire as to what might be the cause of his anxiety he said affectionately—

“Since we have been together, Helen, my one wish has been to please you. Tell me how I have failed?”

“You have not failed,” I answered, “to *me* you have always been kindness, generosity, goodness itself. But it is not about myself that I wish to speak.”

Then, thinking of the interpretation which Courtenay would be almost certain to put

upon these words, I cast down my eyes in the greatest embarrassment. At that moment, as it chanced, they encountered what I must have seen very often before, without, however, paying any attention to it—a little gold seal, with nothing remarkable about it whatsoever, which, together with a small heart-shaped locket, hung down from the Ambassador's watch-chain.

“May I look at that seal?” I asked; but before he could answer me I had turned the stone to the light and was examining it attentively.

As I had anticipated, the little “Pegasus,” which had so captivated my childish fancy,—was scampering across it at full speed. What crowding memories were evoked at sight of him! . . .

“Has this always belonged to you? Have you often sealed your letters with it?” I inquired, eagerly.

“How strange, my child, that *you*, of all

people, should ask me this!" he answered, looking surprised. "No; this seal did not belong to me always! It belonged to some one I was once very fond of, and who is dead now. To *you*, I daresay, it appears absurd that an old fogey like me should ever have cared about anybody, and still more so that my affection should have been returned! Well, well! We've most of us had some kind of romance in our lives, and mine has been over and done with a very long time ago! There hangs her poor little seal, however, where I can look at it every day! I've never sealed any letters with it but the letters I used to write to her, and I never shall." He glanced down at the little seal tenderly and regretfully, and then let it drop with a quick sigh.

To me—jealous, after some strange, unaccountable fashion, on my mother's behalf—this sigh seemed to breathe too cheerful a

spirit of resignation to the inevitable. Since he had wrought all this mischief I could have wished, just then, to believe that he had really suffered for it — mourning and lamenting secretly to the end of his days; whereas this sigh seemed only to mean: “It is useless to recall what can only give me pain. My romance is over and done with; the woman who gave me this seal is dead and buried. It is best not to think about her any more!” I scarcely know, however, what he could have said or done at this particular moment, which would have appeared to me to be altogether decorous and appropriate. I was hardening my heart against him, and just then he could not do right.

I felt in my pocket for the letters. They were there, under my hand.

“Lord Silchester,” I said, summoning all my courage, “as you say you wish so much

to please me, do me now this favour. I wish to speak to you about that person who is dead—the person who gave you that seal. To *me* her name must ever be sacred. Do not mention it, therefore; walls are said, sometimes, to have ears. I will not speak of her by her name, then, but speak of her I must, and I will tell you why. Last night, at the ball, a woman about whose name we need not be so particular—Madame Dobrowolska—came up to me without any provocation and insulted me. You will know that she was there, for she told me that she had seen and spoken to you. What she said about me affected me but little—at any moment I can refute it—but she made cruel and malicious accusations also against that other person; and to prove them, she produced three letters. I would not read them; you will see why; they were not intended for me. I cannot say, therefore,

whether they are really written by that person. *You*, however, will be able to tell. Look at them now ; I have them here for your inspection."

A change came over his face as I finished speaking. My words seemed to pain and surprise him too much for him to reply to them at once. He took up the letters with hands that trembled visibly, and gazed earnestly at the directions upon the envelopes.

"I don't understand," he murmured, after a while, in a voice that sounded quite feeble and broken. "What is the meaning of this? I am altogether bewildered! When were these letters written, and why did I never see them till now?"

"I do not know," I answered ; "when you have read perhaps you will understand. Some wicked person—from an evil motive—must have kept back the letters instead of

sending them to the post. Read them, and then tell me truly whether they were written by *her*. This is all I wish to know."

I have heard it remarked that young people are often cruel, harsh, and intemperate in their judgments,—intolerant with regard to such failings in their elders, as are consequent upon conditions in which they have never been placed themselves. In the present instance, however, I could plead, in extenuation of any such seeming sternness, no such excuse of ignorance. I had known what it was to suffer and to love. I fancied that I had a tolerably correct notion, too, of what it must be like to be tempted; and towards any other man, placed in a similar situation, I hope that I could have felt some manner of Christian charity.

It was, no doubt, the intrusion of the narrowing personal element which caused

me to lash myself into such a mood of virtuous indignation against the man at my side—the man I had come to regard as the seducer of my mother's honour—the destroyer of my father's happiness. His very kindness and devotion to myself seemed now to take the form of an additional outrage. What business had he, of all men, to thrust himself upon my friendship—to treat me as a *protégée*, and embarrass me with favours and obligations?

To think of this now, and of the affection with which I had always regarded him, was little short of agony to me. I looked at him, endeavouring, with all my might, to hate him, and then hated myself because, on account of so many crowding memories, I fell short of my intention. His face, meanwhile, had assumed a ghastly pallor. He looked, as he had said of himself, “utterly bewildered.” My judicial manner, no doubt, pained and surprised him. I could quite

imagine that a circumstance which, to me, seemed fraught with such tragic importance, might have appeared merely in the light of a romantic adventure to the man of pleasure—the “materialist,” whose creed was “Let us eat, drink, and be merry—everything else is nothing.”

But as I watched him unfold, and read, the first of the three letters, I could no longer associate him with this fancy portrait of Hugo’s.

To me there is always something alarming and embarrassing in the distress of a being of the sterner sex, and I almost wished, as I witnessed the Ambassador’s emotion, that I had kept the letters to myself. For some moments he could not trust himself to speak. I saw that he was weeping like a woman. Alas, I could no longer hope that the letters might turn out to be forgeries.

“Oh, God!” he exclaimed, presently,

with a gesture of despair, "what fiend, what devil, intercepted these letters? But she must have known, she must have guessed, that I never received them. She must have guessed it ! . . ."

I drew away towards the further end of the sofa so that I might not intrude upon his agony, whilst with many half-stifled exclamations of emotion he continued reading. I was profoundly affected at the sight of his unhappiness. He was being punished, I thought, and severely punished, for some of the evil he had wrought in the past, and my heart went out to him now in sympathy and compassion.

By-and-by, recovering himself with an effort, he said, taking my hand :

"Helen, in spite of all that happened so long ago—nay, rather, *because* of it, and because, too, of more than I am able to tell you—you and I must always remain good

friends. When you know more of the world you will find that such things have happened very often before, ever since the days of David the Psalmist, and before that again,—you may be sure! I do not say this in extenuation; to me is due all the blame. You may reproach me as much as you like, but you must not turn against me. You have become a part of my life, and without you all interest in existence would go. Think, my child, of all my devotion to you. Before you can remember, when you were only a tiny baby. Look!” and he opened the little heart-shaped locket which hung from his chain by the side of the gold seal, “look at this little curl of yellow hair, cut off only a few days after you were born; you wouldn’t recognize it, now, as yours, would you?” He slipped the locket off its split ring and gave it into my hand. My fingers trembled so that I could scarcely

hold it, and my eyes filled with tears, making it difficult for me, at first, to see what was inside it. Then, when my tears had fallen and I could see more plainly, I held it up to the light and perceived two locks of hair set together. A dark brown lock, and, in the centre of it, in sharp contrast, a tiny golden ringlet; and at sight of this, and of the look of hungry yearning in the eyes of the man at my side, a revelation came to me, the import of which I could not mistake. The voice of nature had spoken.

He saw that I had guessed the truth which he dared not tell me in words. We did not speak, but he held out his arms to me, and we wept together in silence.

I know not how long it was before, hearing a footstep, I looked up. Courtenay Davenant was standing close beside us.

The Ambassador, thinking that he had

entered the room unheard, during these moments of supreme emotion, thrust me from him in hasty embarrassment. But I felt almost too weary, too shattered, to care now what anybody, even Courtenay, might think of me.

“Tell him who I am,” I said, at last, addressing Lord Silchester. “He has a right to know everything. Tell him that I am, that I was, Helen Davenant.”

“Helen Davenant!” exclaimed Courtenay, staggering back in astonishment.

He gazed with a bewildered expression from one to the other of us, and then, turning to the Ambassador, he said slowly, with the manner of one from whose eyes scales have suddenly fallen,

“I see it all now! I understand! If I had not been blinded by jealousy I should have seen it all sooner,—by the likeness, by everything! This young lady is your

daughter. I heard from Sir Harry's own lips that Helen Davenant was not really my cousin."

I could not answer him. I could summon neither words nor ideas. The Ambassador, too, remained silent. By-and-by, Courtenay went on :

"It seems like a dream to me," he said, in a broken voice, "that we two, after all these years, should come together like this. Lord Silchester, I love Helen Davenant. She knows it. I have told her so. For God's sake let there be now no secrets between us three! Tell me everything."

"Tell him everything," I repeated, my voice sounding in my own ears quite faint and far off. "Tell him that I am married, that we can never be anything to one another, that we meet now only to part again for ever."

I felt that the cup of my misery was filled to overflowing. A numb sense of resignation was stealing over my spirit. I think the dead must feel very much as I felt at that moment.

“I will tell him,” Lord Silchester answered, speaking as with a supreme effort. “But, Helen, I have more to tell than you know of. I came here this morning to break to you some news—sudden, unexpected news—that to your kind and compassionate heart cannot fail to be painful and distressing. Seeing you so agitated I dared not tell you at once. How will you be able to bear it now?”

“I can bear anything,” I said, wearily; “a little more or less pain, what can it matter? I am hardened to pain now.”

“Then, my dearest Helen, you are no longer a wife. Hugo Creczoleski died last night by his own hand. They sent for me

early this morning to tell me about it. I pray, my child, that any future you may make for yourself will be brighter and happier than your past."

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT more remains to be told of the story of Helen Davenant, the waves of whose stormy existence seem, at length, to have lashed themselves into a grateful calm?

Of the particulars of Hugo Crecszoleski's death—tragic as were several of the circumstances of his life—I must first inform my readers; because, with that strange, morbid personality, my own lot seemed once to be so irrevocably bound up and blended; and because, even now, when he has gone from me, I cannot, yet, be quite the same as if I had never fallen in with

him. Memories, comparisons, obscure phrases, having to do with him and his mysterious philosophy, are constantly recurring to my mind; and so, in spite of myself, an influence—pathetic, now, rather than sinister—is often with me still; as though some poor wandering ghost, not knowing where to go for comfort, hovered, at times, near at hand, craving for pardon and an occasional tender remembrance.

Hugo, then, after the visit of his sister which had followed immediately upon my own, appeared, to those who had charge of him, to be much as usual. He read and wrote, as was his habit, some way into the night, and then retired to rest. Between one and two o'clock the attendant, who slept in the next room, was aroused by hearing a groan. He went at once to the Prince's bed-side, where a ghastly spectacle

presented itself. Hugo had cut his throat from ear to ear, and he expired before the doctor had been awakened from his slumbers. They would not allow me to look upon him when he was dead, but told me that his face wore a calm and peaceful expression, strangely at variance with the manner in which such peace and calm had been attained.

There can be no doubt but that his suicide was premeditated, and carefully planned in all its details. He had been terribly clever, as people having such intentions usually are, about obtaining and secreting a razor; saying, quite cheerfully, that, as he had begun to receive visits from ladies, he must not appear before them like a savage, and so that he wished to be shaved. Then he had put off the attendant who came to carry out his wishes, to the morrow, after he had managed to abstract

what he required for the perpetration of the fatal deed. I can but lay the blame of it at the door of the woman who had already brought so much misfortune upon us all. That *she*, too, was in some sense distraught, and morally irresponsible for her acts, I am willing, nay anxious, to believe; for I should not like to think that any human creature would have elected to be so evil-natured by choice.

Certain it was, that, after the interview which she had contrived by a series of cunning machinations, upon a day when she had ascertained that Dr. Schumann would be absent from home, her unfortunate brother must have made up his mind that he would rather die than go through another. In this extraordinary woman, poor Hugo had always recognised his evil genius, rendered all the more formidable and insidious by reason of the tie of

kinship by which he was united to her. Her presence must have reminded him of everything that he was most anxious to forget. Peace, freedom, and tranquility of spirit, the hope of even being able to continue, uninterruptedly, his favourite studies, must have vanished at sight of her. Knowing that she was actually staying in Petersburg, although shrouding her identity under a false name, he anticipated, without doubt, a return to the degrading thralldom which had oppressed and crushed him in the past, and with this, too, since some manner of affection was so strangely commingled with his aversion, may have combined some fears for his sister's personal safety. And so, all this anxiety and dread must have decided him, suddenly, to free his spirit from the remnants of humanity that still clung to it, and which impeded its flight to those unknown regions in which he had dwelt

for so long in imagination. A letter directed to me, and which confirmed me in the above theory, was found upon the table after the Prince had breathed his last. It was written with a steady hand, and ran as follows :

“My beloved Helen ; ‘beloved’ in spite of the arbitrary conditions which have combined, for awhile, to separate us ; your visit of to-day, I beg you to believe and to remember, afforded me as much satisfaction and comfort as it is possible for me now to derive from any such circumstance. Your brave, unfettered spirit—your noble intelligence—fortified and revived me ; your beauty, which in the first instance attracted me to your side, was to-day the only influence which alarmed and repelled me when in your presence. Whilst contemplating you thus, in your adorable freshness of youth, I became conscious that my spiritual

regeneration was, as yet, but imperfectly accomplished. The vanities, the emotions of the flesh, were still powerful to tempt and ensnare. If my manner seemed in any degree distant or constrained, attribute it to this cause alone, which with the influence of time must needs have been overcome. But events have been otherwise ordered. With *you*,—my good and invigorating influence,—a malignant and depressing one has, unfortunately, reasserted itself. I feel powerless, without your aid, to check and counteract it. Better, far better, that all should end, as I have determined, when this letter shall be concluded; and that the immortal spirit should regain its eternal freedom! For freedom, at least from one insupportable thralldom, I shall find, although I dare not hope to attain at once to the highest happiness, and acquire a celestial vehicle immediately after quitting this earthly one. As

the Platonists have unanimously determined, 'the souls of men that are not heroically virtuous will find themselves restrained within the compass of this caliginous air;' till, by degrees, becoming purified, they will assume an ethereal splendour, undimmed by any misty obscurity, and which casts no shadow. Then, my beloved wife, I shall rejoin the soul of our son, who, by reason of the purity and simpleness of his terrene body, assumed immediately upon departing from you an aërial form; and so must needs be still separated for a while from his earthly father. You will doubtless find in the world, after I have quitted it, many sincere and devoted friends, who will be anxious to protect you. There should not be any difficulty, either, with respect to a suitable provision for you, once you become my widow. My advice is, that our good friend George should apply directly to the

Emperor. But I am unequal to the consideration of such matters at present. ‘*Quorsum haec alio properantibus*’?—that is to say, such things must be as nothing to men hastening to another purpose. Farewell, then, my beloved Helen; my thoughts are with you at this supreme moment—my spirit seeks you to bid you adieu! *Laissez-moi errer quelques instants auprès de toi, et emporter ce souvenir dans l’éternité!* Be happy; but think sometimes of your unfortunate

“HUGO.”

I was dreadfully shocked and distressed at this terrible news. The heart of woman is complex, and capable of experiencing at the same moment the most conflicting emotions. There were memories connected with the man who was once my husband which were tender and compassionate, and these reasserted their influence as soon as

he was no more. I cannot agree with Shakespeare, that it is "the evil which men do" that generally survives them. In my own case, at least, this was what seemed to have been "interèd" with poor Hugo's bones. Often and often, of late, had I sighed to regain my liberty; I had desired, with all my heart, that the bonds that bound me should be loosened. But I had never asked myself how this end was to be achieved; for I knew that even the hoped-for things which are occasionally vouchsafed to us here scarcely ever come quite in the manner we have planned or foreseen. "*Il faut espérer le moins ce qu'on désire le plus,*" says Christina of Sweden, whose sentiments were so much nobler than many of her actions. And so, because above all things I desired my freedom, I had never hoped—or castle-built—or imagined for myself any possible new life; and now, at last, when liberty had

been vouchsafed to me, I seemed for a while to be like some poor suddenly-released prisoner, who, after the obscurity and closeness of a dungeon, can scarcely bear to look at the blessed sunlight or to breathe the fresh breezes of heaven.

I often wonder, as I look back to this time, what caused me to see, or to imagine that I saw, that ghastly figure reflected in the long mirror at the Embassy ball; at the very moment, too, when, if I may believe poor Hugo's last words, his spirit was seeking me to bid me farewell? The truth of all the many authentic stories regarding such strange appearances seems never, as yet, to have been altogether proved or disproved. For the brain of even a conscientious seer may be heated or over-wrought, and the image it conjures up merely a consequence of delirium. For myself, I have only set down here what I cannot but think that I saw—

for a moment only — for in another the figure had vanished, or rather, it had merged, as it were, into a couple of fantastically-dressed dancers. I cannot be certain, however, whether at that moment the testimony of my own eyes was worthy of credit or not, and it seems to me that this uncertainty must always exist. Hamlet's remark to Horatio might be appropriately quoted in explanation, only it has been appropriately quoted so very often before !

Almost immediately after Hugo's tragical death I was stricken down by illness, before I had time to arrange my departure from Petersburg. The doctor said that I was suffering from nervous prostration. I was nursed with tenderness and devotion, and, in the course of a few weeks, I gradually regained my strength.

As I was lying down one day, reading, upon the sofa in our sitting-room—the scene

of some of the most harrowing moments of my life—I was informed that a “person, looking like a dressmaker,” desired to speak to me; and so, being just then in the midst of ordering new mourning, I asked the footman to show “the person” in.

What was my astonishment when Celestine Vigon, brisk, smiling, and seeming to be totally unabashed, presented herself before me! She appeared to me to be but little altered by the passing of these years, which had wrought, in some, so many changes. Her hair was as black as ever, her teeth as white—her manner as easy, cheerful, and self-confident—as in the old days when I was only a little child. One would have said, to look at her, that a thoroughly good conscience had made her at peace with herself and all the world. Before I had recovered from my astonishment, she had begun a long rambling statement in French. At first I

could not understand the drift of it. By-and-by I realised that it was a denunciation of her employer, Madame Dobrowolska, couched in plausible and polite phraseology ; her eloquence being apparently inspired and sustained by that same consciousness of right which seemed to shed a radiance upon her countenance.

“ *Madame la Comtesse,*” she said, “ had just quarrelled with her, they had now parted company for ever. The Countess had turned upon her, and vituperated her, simply because she had threatened—failing the promise of a certain sum, which she could easily have afforded—to denounce her to the Russian authorities. One threatened things, sometimes, in moments of warmth, which one did not always mean to put into execution. Madame, however, had become furious ; she had called her a traitoress, a serpent, and had accused her

of *lâcheté*, of ingratitude, and of endeavouring to extort money “by *chantage*.” All this, she said, was very unjust. What, after all, had she to be so very grateful for? Madame had, without a doubt, paid her well once upon a time; but she had always received in return the full value of her money. Lately, however, she had led with her the life of a dog, of a galley-slave; and the money had been doled out with great parsimony, madame pleading in excuse for this, her poverty and reduced circumstances; whereas, if she would only abstain from gambling, and from associating with sharpers and adventurers who preyed upon her, there would be amply sufficient money for them both! This passion for play had led the Countess to form the most undesirable acquaintances—most of them persons entirely devoid of principle. With one of these—an individual calling himself the

Count de l'Aquila, and whose name she had assumed in order to obtain an invitation for the fancy ball—she had departed, now, for Monte Carlo. They had invented a system (so many people imagined they had done this!) and meant to *faire sauter la banque*, failing which the Countess had spoken of suicide by means of a pan of charcoal—but this was probably only said to deceive her creditors! With regard to the catastrophe which took place so many years ago, she (Celestine) had been present when it occurred. Quite by accident, when seeking for Zoubiroff—who occasionally assisted the Prince with his experiments—she had penetrated to the scene of the murder, and had witnessed the final act. This accident had proved a fortunate one, procuring for her many solid advantages.

“*Monsieur le Prince*” had always behaved to her with the greatest generosity. Madame,

too, for some time, treated her with consideration. Those were lucky days! Since then, however, everything had changed. Madame had become *difficile* and *exigeante*; she gave way to all kinds of *toquades* and caprices, and no longer lived in the same *luxe*. Sometimes, indeed, there had been actual discomfort to encounter; it was high time, therefore, that persons who respected themselves should separate from her. It was a case of positive *dégringolade* of morals, and she had never felt any real attachment for the Countess.

There was one other subject (she went on) which she desired to speak about. *Madame la Comtesse* was aware that she (Celestine) was possessed of three important letters; she had, in fact, obtained them at madame's instigation, in order that she might assure herself of certain facts. These letters she had been bidden to bring with her to the

fancy ball, at which, but for madame's insistence, she would never have ventured to present herself. Whilst she was there madame had taken these letters from her, to serve a particular purpose (so she said); after which they were to be restored to her again. Since then, however, she had never beheld them; and, upon asking that they might be returned to her, madame had referred her to the young lady—*Miladi Davenant's* daughter—at the *Ambassade d'Angleterre*. Madame was furiously angry when she had demanded the value of the letters, even declaring that she had been instrumental in hastening Lady Davenant's death by exceeding her instructions; and that of this she would accuse her if she continued to annoy her. This, however—“*parole d'honneur*”—was false! She had certainly administered to *miladi* a soothing preparation, such as might, with safety, be

given to an infant. Madame was herself the cause of this, having desired her to obtain immediately a packet of important letters. How could she carry out these instructions when Lady Davenant was so much in her bedroom, unless by some such means as she had employed? As it was, she had failed in her search—no letters were found; but madame was too rejoiced at *miladi's* death to be annoyed at this. Certainly she would not have cared at that time who might have hastened it; and it was possible—only she could not now remember clearly—that, to encourage madame to display a generous impulse, she might even have insinuated that she had had some hand in it; but the truth was, a harmless opiate was all she had administered. She had since heard that it could only be injurious to persons possessed of weak hearts; but this she did not know at

the time. She was sure (she continued) that, after this satisfactory explanation, I should no longer *porter rancune*, but that I would give her the price she had originally demanded for the letters from Sir Harry Davenant, that is to say, one thousand two hundred and fifty francs, or fifty pounds sterling, English money. She would not make two prices, nor would she have made even this moderate demand but for the position in which she now found herself, a position of absolute *gêne*. Would I have the obligingness to make her a little present of fifty pounds? Then, without waiting for my reply, she began to expatiate upon her affection for her mother, and of how she had determined that she should want for nothing in the *maison de santé* in which she had placed her ^{close to} ~~in the~~ Arras, ^{in the} ~~close to~~ *Pas-de-Calais*.

As Celestine Vigon was speaking—I

fancied that I could see, in imagination, the figure of the old French peasant-woman : bent, toothless, palsied, wearing her high white cap and long earrings, a gold cross, perhaps, upon the coloured kerchief covering her shrivelled neck ; crouching over her *chaufferette*, or knitting away, in spite of being *en plein radotage*, at a blue worsted stocking. And then, I seemed to see the money from this dutiful daughter—that was over and above what she required to keep her in luxuries and fine clothes—coming in regularly to the doctor for the necessities of the poor, simple, grateful old woman ; the blood-money, the hush-money, the money that was the price of her daughter's infamy and dishonour !

I remained gazing at this woman, in astonishment, for some seconds after she had finished speaking. She must have

thought me stupid, or deaf, or very ill indeed. Perhaps she fancied that I did not understand French. But I did not care what she thought of me. Of *her*, I was thinking : “ Why were you made thus utterly wanting in moral sense ? The omission is not marked half plainly enough upon your sprightly, handsome, and ingenuous-looking face. What indication could any stranger obtain, by studying it, of the baseness and wickedness of which you are capable ? And yet, not altogether deliberate wickedness, either, nor yet quite deliberate baseness ; seeing that you have always felt convinced of the nobility of your motives, and that a consciousness of right has supported you through all your abominable wrong-doing ! It would be useless for me to reproach you, to denounce you, to give expression to the abhorrence I feel for your acts ; you would never

understand. So I had better not trust myself to enter on a discussion with you, but get rid of you as soon as possible."

Acting upon this determination, therefore, I told her as briefly as possible that I had handed over the letters to Lord Silchester, to whom they were addressed, and that if she desired to make a traffic out of what had never honestly belonged to her, she had better communicate with him upon the subject. I added that I knew nothing about continental law; but that, in England, to steal a letter was accounted a felony, which was punishable by a severe penalty.

She lifted her dark eyebrows in astonishment upon hearing this; but said, nevertheless, as she tripped out of the room, with a polite bow, that she would seek an interview with His Excellency at once:

* * * * *

Those unfortunate letters are now no longer in existence. They had been destroyed, indeed, before Celestine Vigon reached the presence of the Ambassador. Of her interview with him I know no more than that, representing herself as penniless, he agreed, upon certain conditions, to pay her expenses to Paris, where she said that she was certain of being able to obtain a livelihood.

I have reason to believe, although I have gained what information I possess upon the subject in vague, indirect ways, and at irregular intervals of time, that Celestine's advent at Northover Park was due in some sense to Lord Silchester's own influence. He was living at this time in Paris; my poor mother had asked him to find her a clever French maid. Madame Dobrowolska, a great authority then upon matters connected with dress and fashion, had been

applied to by him; and thus this serpent came to be introduced into the quiet English country-home, where lurked unsuspected so many of the recognised elements of melodrama.

But even before my mother's marriage, Delphine Dobrowolska's sinister influence had exerted itself. It was owing to her that my mother had not been united to the one man she loved, to whom she was privately engaged, and who cared for her more than he did for any other woman, in spite of the thoughtless folly which was the cause of her marriage to another man. For it seems that my mother had been induced to marry Sir Harry Davenant in a fit of pique. It was the old old story. A secret understanding between a romantic young couple who had had stolen meetings in woods and orchards. The young man afraid of confiding, yet awhile, in his father, since,

at that time, his elder brother was alive, and he himself only a poor *attaché*. The girl beautiful, sentimental, the spoilt child of an old general who could have given her but little fortune, for, at that time, *she* also had a brother. There was the usual heart-rending parting when the young man went to his foreign post, with mutual vows of eternal constancy. Then, letters, which, by-and-by, upon his part, became rarer and more hurriedly written ; and then came the inevitable mischief-maker, with tales of the Polish syren in Paris, in whose toils "poor George Collingwood," who was "always so weak with regard to women!" was said to be so irretrievably trapped and taken. And just then, to complicate matters and plant the germs of future misery, Sir Harry Davenant, a rich, highly-considered, country gentleman, with a fine house and deer park, proposes to my mother for the second time,

he having been desperately in love with her for more than a year, and she scorning him. Her brother, Everard, had run into debt. Her father was an old man in delicate health. I suppose he must have pressed her not to refuse so advantageous an offer, and so, in an evil hour, the marriage took place.

Perhaps, even then, it might have turned out happily if George Collingwood had never returned from abroad. He seems to have returned just at the wrong moment, too. My mother had been married about three or four years, and must have found herself in some sense "mated with a clown," albeit to one who was altogether devoted to her. Sir Harry Davenant was a most enthusiastic sportsman, and, even at this time, somewhat of a hard drinker. His talk was chiefly about horses and dogs, good or bad "runs," and the defenceless birds,

beasts, and fishes that he had destroyed for his own amusement. A woman is apt to tire of such conversation in time, in spite of the sportsman's intrinsic worth and goodness. Then, too, she was at this time childless. The large old house must have seemed very lonely, I should think, without a nursery, upon dark winter days when Sir Harry was out shooting or hunting, and when my mother was left at home to nurse the dreams and regrets of a wife who realizes, when it is too late, that she is married to the wrong husband. From what I can remember of her thoughtful and beautiful face, and from stray books which I have since chanced upon, underlined and annotated by her hand, I fancy that she must have possessed a sensitive and romantic disposition, the very last disposition in the world to combat and withstand the temptation which was destined to beset her when

this clever and attractive man, her early love, polished by a residence in foreign cities, popular with men, sought after by women, returned once more to his old haunts, to discover, too late, that she was the one woman in the world for him.

And then, afterwards, what a hell upon earth must have been hers, bound and tied to the rough, honest, country gentleman her husband, who so loved and believed in her.

“Next him at night and near him all the day,”

(Upon those days, at least, when his favourite pastime did not take him from home,)

“And longing all those nights and all those days
For but one glimpse of one sad absent face,”

which, perhaps, may not have been so very
“sad” after all !

What torture it must have been to endure

his trust, his unquestioning devotion, and to mark his increasing fondness, as the days went on, for the child of which she knew that he was not the father!

And, during a great part of this miserable time, her “own George,”—who was never altogether her own,—separated from her by “leagues of land and sea,” was passing his days in the pursuit of pleasure and amusement, in the company of frivolous, light-hearted people, whose creed, like his own, was, “Let us eat, drink, and be merry—everything else is nothing!” And to think, too, that, after all, if she had only waited, she might have married this man—to love whom was now accounted a sin—and won him from his thoughtless butterfly existence, for his elder brother was now dead, and he was heir to his father’s title and estates . . . I hope I do not seem to be excusing these two guilty and unhappy lovers!—“*Tout*

comprendre, c'est tout pardonner," I merely endeavour to understand in order that I may forgive,—for I feel that *I*, of all people, should strive to excuse and pardon. Nay, since the existence I owe them has turned from storm to sunshine, I feel disposed to excuse and pardon the sins of the whole world !

* * * * *

I have been married to Courtenay Davenant, now, for nearly ten whole years. They have been years of happiness, of thankfulness, of blessed and unexpected compensation for the years that went before them.

Of what I feel for my husband, of his goodness and devotion, I scarcely dare to write, lest—seeming to count too certainly upon the possession of so great a treasure as his love—it should be lost to me through some sudden stroke of evil fortune. I pray,

I hope, that all may be as it is now to the end of our short lives—short, in such circumstances—however long they may be when reckoned by the years.

Whilst Courtenay remained in the army we had no fixed home, but wandered together from place to place, garnering pleasant memories. Wherever he was, however, a home seemed to spring up at once. Then, after he quitted the service, we did not take up our abode at Northover for two years, but lived hard by, at Croft's Farm, a pretty white house, all covered in summer time with roses and purple clematis.

My old friend. Miss Warden, lives there now. She takes care of some little orphan children, for whom we have founded a home, but still dreams, I believe, in spite of the advancing years, when she has time to dream at all, of the rich and handsome husband who has never yet made his appear-

ance, although he was so plainly foretold by the cards.

We are established at Northover now, and it is astonishing how soon the old, sad, memories have been replaced and elbowed out, as it were, by newer and brighter ones. We have two fine noisy boys, who make the old house merry with their laughter, and a little Helen, hardly able to stand yet, upstairs in the well-known nursery, where the progressive heights of that other Helen, who came before her,—beginning at a yard or so from the carpet,—may be still seen scored up on the door.

All these children have their father's eyes. They bear no likeness whatever to their little brother who is sleeping, so far away, in that remote Alpine valley. For this I cannot help feeling grateful. I would that all the painful recollections of the past could lie buried away as peacefully

as that little child, but with the coming of new years they too will perhaps, slumber!

Lord Silchester still lives principally abroad. Tom Collingwood, his nephew and heir, once a brother officer of Courtenay's, and who is married now to a charming wife, keeps house for his uncle whenever he pays a flying visit to the family-place.

"Blood is stronger than water,"—I correspond with my godfather from time to time as he wished that there should be no break for him in the thread of my life's story.

He tells me that he arranged this marriage with Courtenay for me, in his own mind, very soon after I was born. If he should fall ill, or desire for any reason to see me at once, my husband has promised to take me out to him wherever he may be.

There is a pretty white marble tomb now where there was once but a nameless grave

in Northover churchyard, round which the blossoms of all the changing seasons shed their fragrance. It is erected "by Courtenay and Helen Davenant," and after the inscription upon it there is a text about the goodness and mercy of God, and the hope we have of Eternal Life. I should have wished that something else might have been engraved upon it also :

"Judge not, that ye be not judged,"

or the text which says that only those who are without sin themselves should throw the first stone at an erring sister — only that this would seem like taking the whole neighbourhood into our confidence.

THE END.

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